



FAR POINT

Issue No. 4 May/June 1992

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The Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine



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FAR POINT

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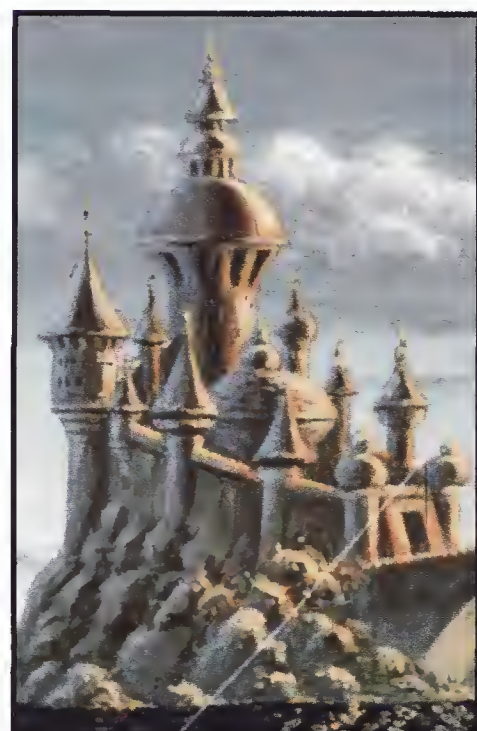
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VIEW POINT

OF CATS AND THE COSMOS.

What is it about cats? There's plainly some kind of spiritual connection between SF authors and felines, and I'm not sure why. It seems that 90% of the "potted biographies" that accompany manuscript submissions to FAR POINT include some reference to the creatures. If it's not "she lives in Lincolnshire with a mountain bike and a cat", it's "Fang the Siamese is his severest critic". Perhaps it's a career necessity? Stand up **Andy Sawyer**, author of "The Hard Man", which appears in this issue; a man with the foresight to acquire a cat to further his writing career. You might think that a cat was a fairly conventional pet for an SF writer to keep; why not a boa-constrictor or a tarantula, or maybe something endangered from a rain-forest? However, detailed research shows that cats are among the few life-forms independent enough to survive on precious little attention, level-headed enough to realise that you're still good for a free meal, and supercilious enough to make you feel grateful for the chance to provide it. A higher intelligence or just an essential research tool? **James Morrow** memorably paraphrased **Thomas M Disch** with the observation that "aliens are finally just your cat". Or at least they're kith and kin.

A PUBLISHER'S PROGRESS

The issue that you're reading now takes us into the second half of our first year. A small enough occasion for celebration, to be sure, but any magazine launch is a risky business, and plenty of people were betting that we wouldn't last. It's a foolish editor who tempts fate, but we're happy that we're not only still here, in fact, but actually growing. The special subscription offer (see pages 2 and 3) is appealing to an increasing number of readers, and our news-stand distribution figures point to a steadily rising readership elsewhere. The nature of newstrade distribution is such that one has to wait many months before detailed and accurate sales figures are available, and these invariably include a higher percentage of "returns" than hoped. It'll be a while before we start relaxing, but we ought at least to thank all readers, contributors and well-wishers for your much appreciated support thus far.

One little compliment was paid to us recently: a Large Publishing Company offered to buy us out. Well, perhaps not *that* large, but a good deal larger than anyone operating in SF. So why didn't we sell? Every time I look at a printer's bill I ask myself the same question. Basically, paying the bills might be a nightmare, but it's *our* nightmare, and we couldn't see that the deal offered us would have done the magazine much good, considering the plans that the would-be purchaser hinted at. Or maybe it was because doing this is actually a load of fun, and we get to read heaps of SF for free. Then again, perhaps the real reason was that we weren't about to be able to retire to the Canaries (or even to Grantham) on the sum offered. Thanks for the compliment, but any other bidders please start at seven figures, in any hard currency.

Someone who does lie low in the Canaries is writer **Andy Cox**, whose story "Fast Forward" will appear in one of those future issues. Andy's story had just made it to the top of the notorious FAR POINT submissions heap (a climb of around six weeks, currently) when Karen and I decided that an early holiday was called for. We took ourselves to Tenerife in search of some Sun (my co-operative employers having decided to

send me halfway round the third world for a chunk of the coming summer), and chanced to remember most of Andy's address while bouncing round the island in the worst hire car I've ever seen. As we happened to be nearby, we turned up on his doorstep down a moderately remote lane with an acceptance of the story. Recovering his aplomb magnificently, Andy still wouldn't believe our claim that we gave this personal treatment to all authors. . .

A number of readers have commented on the difficulty of finding FAR POINT in various parts of the country. Well, we're not in W H Smith's yet, and that alone accounts for a lot of the problem; Smith's, with one or two other large firms, have a stranglehold on wholesale distribution of magazines, so many other smaller shops buy their magazines from them. As wholesalers tend to have a near monopoly in any given area of the country, this means that if you're not in Smith's Wholesale in a particular region, you're locked out of a large number of independent newsagents as well. However, with effect from this issue, we're also being handled by Titan Distribution to various specialist outlets - so try your local SF or comic shop if you're fed up traipsing miles to track us down. Of course, you could always subscribe. . . which takes us back to the book offer!

New Faces at FAR POINT

Joining us from this issue onwards is **Bryan Hunter**, to take up the position of Consultant Editor, while the artist **David A Hardy** joins us as Art Director from Issue 5 onwards. As the workload climbs steadily with every passing day, the arrival of two such level-headed, practical and knowledgeable people is an enormous benefit. Bryan's encyclopaedic scientific background, long-standing love of SF and perceptive critical skills have debunked quite a number of poor stories already, while his sympathetic eye (the left one) has led to successful suggestions for rewrites. David's work in illustrating both science fact and science fiction is longstanding and extremely well known. Having illustrated his first book in 1954, he has since been a many-times magazine cover artist (*Galaxy*, *If*, *F&SF*, *Amazing*, *Analog* etc), a Hugo nominee, exhibitor, photographer, writer.... Welcome to you both.

This Month

Again we're able to bring you a wide-ranging collection of SF and Fantasy fiction. **John Brunner** takes us out to a research colony on Tethys; **Mike O'Driscoll** has a spot of tribal trouble; **Andy Sawyer's** hero runs into a bullet-proof villain; **Sarah Ash** tells of a dreadful revenge and **David Wade** stirs things up on a mining ship out in the asteroid belt. As ever, there's plenty more to choose from.



TALKING POINTS

We welcome your letters on any SF/Fantasy related subject. Obviously, we reserve the right to edit what we print, and we particularly look forward to your comments on FAR POINT.

What follows is a sample of letters we have received commenting on FP so far. We've had far more than we can print, but the following extracts represent the general consensus.

I am getting ready to duck from the flak this letter might generate.

Although I do not wish to take to task Mr Johnson in his appraisal of Mr Bracegirdle's dinosaur story, I feel that there ought to be a certain amount of leniency in the extrapolations that S.F. can generate. Let me cite a few examples. In the book *The Science in Science Fiction* it was pointed out that a certain author had dropped a couple of noughts in his calculation of the impact energy of a large asteroid upon the Earth; so what. The reader clearly knew the resulting bang was going to be impressive and that is all the author was getting at. And his narrative still carried it off. However, no amount of skill can overcome the cock up in the Hubble space telescope mirror. The supposed experts drop far bigger clangers than we're likely to see in the pages of S.F.

For example, what about Voyager's mission to Saturn; the TV experts discredited Galileo saying his predictions could not be. Horror of horrors, when Voyager got close most of Galileo's predictions were right. I didn't hear them rushing to apologise. And let's take the Turin shroud, they took a strand of material and had it carbon dated ... and declared it not old enough. Then it was analysed by another lab and they got a difference of some seven hundred years from one end to the other... Whoops! If you take that sort

of razor sharp accuracy and then multiply it by millions of years back to the dinosaurs we're probably miles out anyway. Science fiction tests the waters while the experts hide in the sand dunes declaring that it can't be cold because they haven't measured it. Motto: just because you can't see it doesn't mean it can't exist.

S.F. has started to get more respectful over the last few years because the boffins often discover some new law or effect that would make some plot possible. I for one will stick my neck out and say that we should not be surprised if we do develop a superluminal drive system, or even some kind of time travel; nature seems to produce some very peculiar phenomena around superdense objects, when man learns to duplicate those effects the sky is the limit. I must defend artistic license and quote an axiom; that the S.F. author is free to invent anything he likes, so long as nobody can prove him wrong. And let's face it nobody can, least of all the experts. Don't let science fiction fall into the hands of the calculator brigade, let's keep it fresh and vibrant.

Martin St Pierre
Huntingdon

I have recently obtained a copy of your brilliant magazine FAR POINT and it is just the type that I have been searching for. It is an excellent production and I shall

become a regular reader.

I am a pensioner who loves to write and in 1936 had my first success when I won a detective story competition and had it published in "Detective Weekly", a Sexton Blake magazine which at that time was very popular. I am an avid reader of all styles and especially SF both by modern authors and the older masters such as H G Wells.

A Lowndes
Cheshire

Congratulations on what is so far looking to be one of the best science fiction magazines to be published this century (which probably means 'ever') Keep up the good work.

However, regarding "Tell Me What You See, Miss Ellis?" published in Issue 3, I have a few questions that you might consider. Did Victorian prison officers normally go around hanging anybody that they stumble across? If not, was it customary for the Victorian prison officers to be blind, stupid or both? If the answers to the above questions are both "No", then was the mustard-tweed jacket and dark green cravat the standard Victorian prisoner's uniform? Otherwise, I cannot understand how Mr Mannheim could possibly have been mistaken for an escaped convict. All seems a bit weak to me. Good idea though.

M Roberts
Lincs

Many thanks for Issue 3 of FAR POINT. There wasn't an unreadable story in it, quite an achievement. There is a N Other magazine where I regularly find myself skipping two or three stories from each issue. Keeping them short and fast proba-

bly helps; more from John Duffield please (providing he writes like this one). The standard of artwork is certainly higher than Issue 1 as well.

P Hamilton
Leics

May I congratulate you on FAR POINT. You have vitality in your stories sadly lacking in Interzone. Please keep up this excellent quality.

R Jackson
York

I'd like to say how much I've enjoyed the issues of FAR POINT I've read so far, and all the best for a (hopefully long) future.

D Pearson
Edinburgh

This is the first time that I have submitted any of my work; I chose your magazine because it has a friendly feel to it.

R Clearly
London

I'm pleased to hear that your first issue sold out - good sign, eh? I must say that I think there is room for improvement in some areas; most noticeably in the colour artwork.

R Cadger
Beds

It is always nice, (God I hate that word; strike it and insert heartening), to see another science fiction or fantasy magazine to get past issue 1, so good luck, may you survive for many, many years.

N Bennion
Birmingham



CONVENTIONS

CON REPORT CASH?

Why not get back some of the money you spent at the bookstalls/art auction/bar?

Send in a convention report to *FAR POINT*! Take a look at Johan D Sinclair's feature on *Novacon 21* in our last issue as an example of what we're looking for. Good quality photos welcomed.

We'll pay our standard rates for any material we publish. One thousand words or less, please. Normal rules apply for submissions (S.A.E.'s, contact address etc.).

FORTHCOMING CONVENTIONS

Many people will tell you that conventions are where SF really happens. Guests of honour from among the big name authors, art auctions, talks, interviews, themes, films, workshops - and an exhausting social life ...

Where do you find out about them? Well they'll all be advertised at other conventions, of course! And in *FAR POINT* as well. Each issue we provide details of forthcoming conventions that we've heard about. If you're a convention organiser, let us know about it and we'll give it a free listing in these pages, up to around a year in advance., until the event.

All listings are given in good faith and details are extracted from event publicity material.

CON REP

ANIMEDAY0092, Rutland Hotel, Sheffield, 7-8th March 1992

This was a weekend devoted to the showing of videos of Japanese animation (Anime) and restricted to those who had paid £20 to register. Almost all the videos were SF or fantasy and this is the type of Anime most favoured by British and US enthusiasts. For the established fans this was a social Con, but for the neos it was primarily a weekend to view videos and purchase essentials like scripts, synopses or associated manga (comics) from the dealers' room. The attendance, about 120, was modest by SF Con standards, and about 95% male; a glance at the film list below may explain why! The hotel, in the suburbs of Sheffield, was a warren of Victorian villas but the hotel staff were uniformly friendly and helpful.

The programme consisted primarily of a large number of video showings (on four screens). About one in three was subtitled (courtesy of US fandom). The remainder were mostly in Japanese. Two of the screens operated throughout Saturday night, and some video discs were shown in the early hours of the morning. This was the first time your reporter had seen a videodisc in action; in case you haven't either, they are silvery about 12" in diameter and are played in a machine of proportionate

size. The resultant quality is much better than a mass-produced videotape.

Supporting items included a quiz, two auctions and two talks, one of which, a well-presented talk by Helen McCarthy (editor of *ANIME UK* fanzine), was about the male hero in Anime. There was also an art show and a board games room.

No attempt was made to introduce the videos or explain what was going on in non-subtitled films and at times one felt there was an 'in-crowd' who didn't want to be bothered by ignorant neofans. A glance at the registration list suggests that none of those attending were involved with SF fandom.

As this was primarily a video view weekend, it seems appropriate to conclude with a listing of some of the films shown and an indication of the content. For entertainment value, some of these equal anything that the West has to offer.

A-Ko the VS - Grey and Blue: 105 mins (three cute girls, daftness and mayhem, *Dirty Pair-Eden Project*: 93 mins (Girl secret agents, violent bimbos),

Bubblegum Crisis 4&5: 95 mins (all female undercover team with motorbikes and robot suits),

The Secret of Blue Water Movie "Into the Misty Blue": 90 mins (about circus girl with mysterious crystals, *Aura Battler Dunbine - TV Videos 1-3*: 100 mins (space opera), *Project A-Ko 4*: 68 mins (3 cute girls, madnes and

mayhem), *Crying Freeman*: 100 mins (Hong Kong tong assassin), *Robotech ep.1*: 25 mins (robots), *Yamato The New Voyage*: 90 mins (Spacegoing WWII battleship), *Outlanders*: 110 mins (Naughty alien invasion movie with Princess Kahm), *Dominion 1+2*: 80 mins (Police with tanks), *Sol Bianca*: 60 mins (All female space pirates), *Robotech the Movie*: 90 mins (robots), *Endless Road SSX*: 25 mins (Captain Harlock; enigmatic space pirate with space galleon), *Pinesalad Dirty Pair 3&4*: 52 mins (violent bimbos), *Robot Carnival*: 85 mins (8 short films, robot theme), *Appleseed*: 70 mins (gripping SF thriller), *Black Magic M66*: 50 mins (gripping SF thriller; rogue military robots), *City Hunter Movie*: 100 mins (comedy/detective), *Patlabor Movie*: (Software problems with worker robots), *Char's Counterattack*: 130 mins (spacewar, politics, robot suits - Mobile Suit Gundam), *Venus Wars*: 50 mins (land battle sequences), *Orguss Memorial 1 & 2*: 110 mins (fairies, spaceships, robots, monsters etc), *Kiki's Delivery Service*: 110 mins (delightful film about a young witch and her cat), *Record of Londoss War 1 - 4*: 110 mins (sword and sorcery), P.S. Don't bother asking for any of these videos at your local video shop.

Johan D. Sinclair

DUALLISTS

By David Wade

As soon as I realised that something was going wrong, I immediately knew two things: one, that it was sabotage and two, who was responsible. Reese - my enemy.

Like everybody else in the huge circular room, I was sitting before a console, my eyes obscured behind the computer linked visual relay unit strapped to my brow, which was feeding me lots of digitized pretty pictures, albeit pretty pictures of lumps of rock.

The name of the game - if a momentous job like mine could ever be called a game - was ore refining. The actual mining was done by colossal laser drills, breaking down thousands of tons of raw matter and selecting the promising segments, providing an endless stream of bleak chunks to be analysed and sliced apart with microscopic beams, which of course had to be manually co-ordinated. You guessed it - that's where I come in, and it is as dull as it sounds.

The work force was large and organised into teams of a dozen people ... just ordinary men and women, doing a job that needed little training, working solely for credit. Although the larger companies of the time were producing fully-automated ships, most still needed cheap human labour. And as you can imagine, healthy competition between work teams was actively encouraged.

Except sometimes it wasn't healthy at all.

According to the 3D graphical diagrams floating before my eyes, everything was normal; I was scanning the ore samples, locating the specific elements - usually iron and nickel, sometimes platinum - and excising them from the rock with surgical precision, ready to be processed. Only when I bothered to check the current shift memory did I discover that, despite working solid for three hours, I was still nowhere near my quota; the stores were receiving only a quarter of the elements that I had located.

So where the bloody hell's the rest of it? I remember thinking angrily ... and the answer was that it was being destroyed along with the rest of the waste ore. I was consigning valuable materials to disintegration.

Furious, I tore the visual relay from my head and slammed it down on the console, blinking a few times to accustomize to normal vision. In one swift motion I swivelled my chair round and leapt to my feet, striding purposefully across the circular room towards the one who I knew had managed to interfere with my refiner, disrupting the signals between console and microlaser bank so that although it looked to me that my work was accurate, the beams were actually striking at random,

making me appear careless, an amateur.

I knew it could be done, because I had been considering doing it to *his* refiner.

"Reese!" I yelled as I came up behind him, not thinking of the attention I would gain. He was my opposite number, both of us being team leaders, and for weeks our little squads had been competing for the highest efficiency rate in the department - a game that had grown out of control. Like everyone else in the room, he sat erect and still, except for the fingers that danced expertly across his console, responding to data flowing through the sophisticated steel band across his eyes.

My hand fastened on his shoulder and spun him round in his seat; in response he calmly removed the visual relay and blinked up at me, wearing a slight frown on his flat-nosed and bearded face that seemed to blend irritation and puzzlement. Reese was considerably bigger than me, not much short of two metres and stocky with it, filling out every inch of the standard dark grey work suit we all wore. He was almost guaranteed to be able to deck me with one blow ... not that we had ever been allowed the luxury of a good fight, although we had often come close.

"What's eating you, Miller?" he inquired levelly, innocently ... but his eyes told the truth. *Yeah, the son of a bitch did it all right.* Although his expression was controlled, his stare was one of undiluted satisfaction ... smugness. Those beady brown orbs were windows onto a twisted, vindictive soul that I knew only too well. Reese wasn't evil or anything as clear cut as that - he was just a bastard. But a *clever* bastard.

"Take a guess," I hissed in reply, feeling a boiling tension tighten my muscles into cords and my fingers into fists. Peripherally, I became aware that the



ubiquitous sound of working consoles no longer filled the room; no doubt both teams had paused to watch this confrontation, two dozen curious faces and identical thoughts: *Reese and Miller. Again.*

I'm no sure what would have happened at that moment - although I was certainly mad enough to be considering a pre-emptive punch - had not the black-suited figure that strode out of nowhere said in a deep, warning tone: "What's the problem?"

That brought home to me the extent of my rage - I had forgotten about Integrity. That was what the corporate internal security division called themselves; they were a completely separate system aboard ship, removed from the command hierarchy and thus having very few strictures to impede their fearsome, and well-publicised, efficiency. Not even the ex-ex - the executive officers - were immune to scrutiny and investigation by Integrity, who punished transgressions of even minor laws with instant dismissal. And, as my good friend Niles had once sagely warned me, dismissal from a big company meant that



you were unlikely ever to work again.

The first thing we had all learned was not to draw attention from Integrity.

Which I was doing with effortless stupidity. The Integer - our slang name for the security troopers that patrolled every area - was glowering darkly at me beneath the rim of his helmet, which was made of the same rigid plastic alloy as his light body armour. The leather-gloved hand that casually rested on the hilt of his zap rod telegraphed libraries of dangerous information.

I revolved away from Reese, bitterly swallowing my fury. "I'm having difficulties with my refiner, sir," I explained, feeling more than a little foolish as I added, "Possibly a malfunction." The anger burning through my blood had congealed into a queasy anxiety in my gut. I wasn't scared of Reese, no matter how big he was, but you'd better believe that I was scared of Integrity.

The Integer nodded almost imperceptively, shadowed eyes burning into mine with quiet intensity even as he gestured towards Reese.

"And you are accusing this man of adversely affecting your work?"

Icy needles lanced through my belly. In saying that, the Integer had proved not only that he had witnessed my ire, but that Integrity were fully aware of the ... rivalry, I guess you'd call it ... between me and Reese. And now I was walking on razor wire.

"No sir," I responded, fighting to keep my voice steady and maybe inject a note of surprise - *break, regulations? who, me?* "I thought that this might be a, ah, system error, and so I wanted to check with the other team, to see if their instruments had been affected." A good lie - not great, but not too shabby either, I hoped.

Glaring at me suspiciously, the Integer waited for Reese to deny that, to remark that I was in the process of accusing him - which I knew that Reese would not do. The merest whisper of sabotage was taken seriously by Integrity and would warrant a full-scale inquiry; whoever lost the case would be redundant there and then, either for being guilty or for making false accusations - it was all or nothing. Neither of us would ever report the other, for fear of being unable to prove it.

When Reese simply regarded me neutrally - although the laughter in his eyes found a booming echo in my head - the Integer knew he had nothing to warrant his presence here. "Report your problem to your controller and resume working," he instructed me in a bored voice, already turning to walk away. As was I, for one more second of Reese's confident, triumphant stare was liable to make me sick.

The work shift ended several hours later. The service techs had managed to trace the fault in my refiner - "Just a program fluctuation," sure thing - but despite a frenzied attempt to make up for lost time, I still finished behind quota, and the admonishment was duly recorded in my file. I had avoided Integrity's spring-loaded touch, but the victory was Reese's.

As the shift broke up, I noticed that people were surreptitiously watching both of us, perhaps anticipating an exchange of

choice words ... as if it was all just onboard entertainment. But Reese avoided my hate-filled eyes as he left his console and talked casually amongst his team. It felt to me like he was two people - the friendly, brash, reliable boss, and the ruthless, baleful, cunning adversary - and of course, only I could see the latter.

Something else I noticed, as we exited the room, was the atmosphere between our two work teams an undercurrent of repressed violence, evident in the subtle shoves and venomous looks and occasional harsh remark - "Out of my way, bitch," - that flickered like summer lightning between certain people. The most attractive member of my team, a young blonde woman, surprised me with her animosity towards a dark-haired girl on Reese's crew.

They were like two wolf packs, growling and snarling over contested territory. Not enough to alert Integrity, thank god, but I wondered - was this nothing more than loyalty to their team leaders, responding en masse to our private conflict? Or did everybody have an enemy nowadays?

In an attempt to escape from the rumbling chatter of my workmates, I took the elevator up a few decks and wandered at random along grey-walled passages lit by garish neon. That's all the ship was to me - rooms, lifts and corridors. I'd never seen it from the outside, although Niles once told me it resembled a fat black spider, squatting on top of the asteroids while brilliant fire lanced down from its belly. Nothing special. They had given it some fancy Latin name, but even that sounded like all the other ships in space ... pretentious, hollow. There seemed no point in naming things that were all as ugly as each other.

I walked aimlessly, unsure of how to dampen the choleric flame that still blazed along every nerve of my body. I could have gone down to the mess hall, but frustrated anger had robbed me of the desire for both food and companionship. There was nothing in my quarters to interest me, and I was certainly too tense to sleep. I could have rented out a PR chip and indulged in some sensual fantasy, but recent scuttlebutt, had put me right off that idea - the last thing I needed was to be deranged by a malfunctioning recreation system.

And what I *really* wanted to do was smash that smug look right off Reese's stupid face!

"Hey Joel!" That familiar voice came from behind me, shattering my introspection. It was difficult, but I managed a smile of greeting as Scott Niles walked leisurely up to join me, the immaculate white uniform on his lanky frame contrasting sharply with the deep black of his skin.

Despite our considerable differences in professional rank, he was just about the closest companion I had on ship. Niles was one of the exex; specifically, he was chief program technician on the 'cannon', that enormous tube of electromagnets that fired refined metals through space for the astrofreighters to pick up and take back to Mars. He was vital and I was almost insignificant, but we got on together as if we'd been to the same training college or something.

"How's things with you, Scott?" I asked

as he approached.

He ventured a thoughtful sort of half-smile. "Judging by the look on your face, I think that should be my line."

If there was a single word you could associate with Niles, it was 'smooth'; his voice was deep with a warm quality, his pace was steady and unhurried, his demeanour was always calm and reasonable, as if he already knew the answers to any question worth asking. I guess I sort of envied him in a lot of ways, particularly when I was mad as hell and he was almost religiously serene. No wonder he was an exex and I was a console drone.

He walked with me along the seemingly endless corridors while I related the events in the refining room, noting the wince on his dark features at my mention of the Integer. Niles knew all about my campaign against Reese, and to him this was an update on current developments... he was practically my co-conspirator.

"So he managed to get a virus into your refiner," he mused softly, to avoid being overheard. "Presumably in response to you drugging his food with that sedative I got you from the medical stores."

"Which I did because he somehow managed to access my file and make all my quota reports look bad," I replied defensively.

"Which *he* did because you planted some drugs in his cabin and gave Integrity an anonymous tip-off. I still don't know how he got out of that one." Niles sighed and shook his head, the tightening of muscles around his jaw betraying his disapproval of our sordid little war. "I don't know Joel .. perhaps you should give this up. It seems to be getting more and more dangerous."

"I'm not quitting." I could never shout at Niles, but the sternness in my voice was enough to convey my determination. "Not now."

"Look, Reese has proved a point, so perhaps you're equal now. Can't you just leave it at that?"

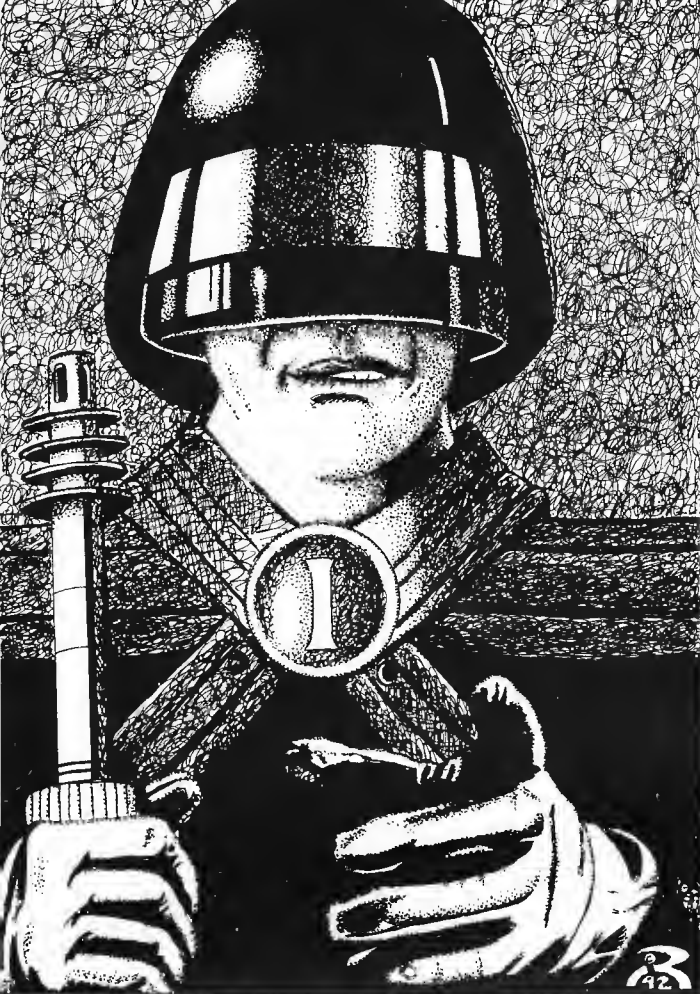
"He won't leave it. I know Reese he'll press the advantage, try to beat me when I'm down, you know?" I think I actually cracked my knuckles at that point, although dramatics were wasted on Niles. "You've gotta help me beat him first."

He looked askance at me then, serious eyes trying to calculate the depth of my emotions. In a quiet voice he asked "You really want to deal with him that badly, Joel?"

I nodded without hesitation. "If it wasn't for all the bloody Integers on this ship, I would have dealt with him ages ago."

For a moment he seemed to be contemplating something - *reporting me to Integrity? No, not Niles* - then he let out another languid sigh. "I don't remember who started all of this," he said with an air of regret, "but I suppose it'll be you that finishes it. Okay, Joel, I'll help you one last time ... but first, I want you to forget about it for a while, in case you do something rash." He fished around in one of his uniform's pockets. "This should help take your mind off things," he added, flashing a gleaming white grin.

I looked down at the silver casing of a PR chip nestling in his dark palm, part of me aware that he had waited until the passage was empty and we were in a section free



from Integrity's security monitors. "No thanks man," I shook my head. "I like my mind where it is."

Niles gave me a despairing look designed to make me feel like a naive kid. "You know what the inquiry's verdict was - the PR machines are safe. Those guys were using dodgy, black market chips, and they caused an electrical feedback. Believe me, this baby's charm ... I've had it officially tested. Hell, I've used it myself. You'll love it."

I hesitated; Niles and I had often played the game of swapping chips and letting the other find out for himself what was on them. He could get hold of some very expensive fantasy programs meant only for exex only, and believe me, that sort of thing was sorely tempting. "Illegal?" I asked candidly.

"Rare." He slipped the chip into my jacket pocket. "Very, very rare. I'd appreciate you taking good care of it, 'cause they're damn hard to get hold of. But you'll love it," he reiterated, offering a comical wink. "Something to help that aggression of yours."

Niles remained cryptic despite my insistent pressuring, knowing full well how curious his little 'offerings' always made me. And so, when the night period rolled around and I had nothing better to do, I found myself in my quarters, wearing the device that I had sworn never to touch again.

The Psychogenic Reality units had long since replaced both drugs and television as the major source of recreation and entertainment. I never liked to dwell on how it worked because it sort of shook me up, although it was absolutely painless. Basically, the helmet-shaped unit sent tiny microlasers through your eyes, digitally encoded with whatever data was on the program chip; these 'accessed' the optic nerves and thus transmitted the signal

directly to the relevant areas of the brain.

This meant that you could throw the real world out of the window and indulge in your most unlikely fantasies. The cheaper chips on the market were purely visual, but the standard ones allowed *all* your senses to be manipulated however you liked, and the expensive chips even let you alter your own emotions via the stimulation of certain glands. Of course, each program was fully customizable, and could be tailored to the user's personal pleasure.

As you can imagine, the vast majority of the PR chips were sexual in nature, although many catered to a different sort of desire; Niles once gave me an excellent combat program in which I made my opponent resemble Reese down to the minutest detail, then proceeded to beat the hell out of him, glorifying in the sensation of bones fracturing under my fists. That had been wonderfully cathartic, and I suspected this latest chip would be along the same lines. Good - I was well in the mood.

As I lay down on my bed, sliding the PR unit over my face, something Niles had once said came floating up from the ocean of memory like an errant wave: "I think you enjoy this duel of yours too much, Joel. I think it's the most exciting thing that's ever happened to you." Back then, I had retorted that getting even with Reese was a serious business, but now I began to realise who well Niles knew me. In many ways, I did enjoy matching wits with Reese; there was a terrible, corrosive part of me that thrived on our indirect challenges, a battle that had to be conducted furtively, kept secret from Integrity's prying eyes.

In fact, now that I thought about it, I began to accept that in spite of my cursing and repressed rage, I actually relished the fact that Reese had struck a blow against me ... relished it because revenge would be sweet, and now I had something to plan and anticipate, killing time on this hulk of a ship. Besides, I had read somewhere that you could judge a man by the quality of his enemies ... surely having a nemesis such as Reese, powerful and surprisingly devious, elevated me above the common herd? Certainly he had given my life purpose, something to make all the risks worthwhile. Perhaps I ought to be grateful to the man that I hated with a black, acidic passion.

The metallic faceplate concealed my bitter smile as I slotted in the PR chip, activated the unit ...

... and felt something utterly alien explode into my mind.

KILL - KILL - KILL - KILL - KILL ...

Viciously fast. Devastatingly powerful.

Unimaginably ruthless. I revolve my squat body on more than two legs, flexing blades with tendons of taut wire, glaring out at a world that is painful in its clarity, for I see/hear/smell/taste/feel everything.

KILL - KILL - KILL - KILL...

I move with unnatural speed and vigour, velocity ferocity, predator hunting prey, driven by a killing imperative a hundred times more overwhelming than the most demanding urge I have ever known.

KILL - KILL - KILL...

I am unstoppable, a living machine of rage and death and howling, livid need. Preternatural senses converge from me ... the prey that wears Reese's face. I tear it off. I shred him, reduce him to a crimson spray that rains thick droplets on my back. I immerse myself in how it feels .. monstrously terrifying...

... and wildly, fantastically intoxicating.

KILL - KI-

It was for ever and it was a snapping of fingers, quicksilver eternities blurring through my head, but eventually I felt reality solidify around me, the familiar weight of bone and muscle that was my true body. My human body ... which shivered and sweated and ached with exertion.

The bedsheets beneath me were torn, shredded rags.

I pulled the PR off my head and let it clang against the floor, wanting to throw up and yet feeling strangely hungry. *What the hell was that?!* It was totally unlike any fantasy program I'd ever known; no master menus, no options, no comprehensible images ... just relentless sensation being driven painfully into the naked mind, beyond the nightmares of the most imaginative psychogenic programmer. God, it had been so *awful!*

But somehow ... somehow it had felt good, too.

I bounded up from the bed with my heart thumping crazily behind my ribcage, finding myself pacing the room, avoiding the mirror for fear of the savage, leering visage that might glare back at me. Despite my shuddering, I seemed to be tapping into some limitless source of energy, for right then I felt like I could run the length and breadth of the ship, punching out whoever I passed en route. Niles had said the chip would help my aggression, and he was spot on - it had helped it reach a new pinnacle of hostility.

Niles.

My fist lashed out against the wall, leaving a noticable dent. It was Niles who had given me that terrible, wonderful chip, the man I had labelled as a friend, an ally in my struggles. What was the purpose of that hideous device, offered so innocently?

Abruptly, I recalled the 'accidents' that had been generating disturbing rumours on this voyage ... the seven crewmen who had been found babbling insanely behind their PR helmets, personalities scrambled into oblivion by whatever had been on chips now mysteriously blank ... chips that no-one could trace. But I knew where their genesis lurked - in the psychotic, depraved mind of Scott Niles, that patiently understanding exex whose charming smile masked an obscene mass murderer.

And yet, I had survived the process, and that puzzled me. When I inspected the chip, I found that it had automatically

erased itself upon completion, leaving me with another puzzle; for right at the end, when the cacophony of images and feelings faded into merciful darkness, a computer-generated set of co-ordinates flashed into view, a bizarre epilogue that seemed too much like a taunting invitation to ignore.

My wall terminal provided the answer when I used to call up a schematic of the ship. There was my destination - an obscure maintenance tunnel in the engineering section of the nuclear engines, deep in the labyrinthine bowels of the mining vessel.

That's where I would find Niles ... and that's where I would force the truth from my 'friend'.

The urge was on me to burst out of my quarters and pound down the corridors like an avenging angel, but a second impulse warned me of how conspicuous that would be. So I moved quietly down past the decks, stalking the ship and stealthily avoiding the patrolling Integers and their security monitors, ghosting past them with surprising ease - it seemed like some innate skill, the technique of the hunter, had been unleashed by my recent experience, and right then I did nothing to hinder the almost primordial instincts that propelled me. Had I come across Reese in those darkly-lit passages, I would have snapped his neck without pause... that in itself speaks volumes for what I was feeling, but even more exhilarating was knowing I *could* do such a thing.

With predatory acumen, I managed to sneak into the convoluted web of tunnels and ducts that formed the engineering level. Any sound I made was masked by the repetitive throb of power generators and electrical engines, pulsing out life-supporting energy. The air down here was thick and hot, beading my face with sweat as I fought my way through the tangled loops of cables, thinking that all the engineers had to be bloody midgets to move along those squat, narrow, awkwardly-curved accessways.

I had to clamber through a tiny maintenance conduit less than a metre high to reach my goal. The room was small, branching off into half a dozen different areas - obviously there were other routes not on the official schematic.

Dominating everything was the door: a large steel slab set into the bulkhead wall, tarnished with use but still as solid and unyielding as the ship's hull. There were no operating panels in sight, and for a long while I simply stared at it with frustrated fury, as though the force of my grimace might convince it to open up before me.

Which in a way is exactly what happened ... for the room suddenly echoed a metallic grinding as the huge door slid aside. Gasping in surprise, I briefly glimpsed the concealed monitor on the wall before the silhouette framed in the doorway captured my attention, I found myself dropping to a crouch, muscles bunching, ready to spring as the newcomer walked forwards with a zap rod in one hand, highly illegal because he was *not* an Integer.

"Welcome to the arena, Miller," said the swarthy young man in blue engineer's uniform. He sheathed the neural stunner and gestured beckoningly. "If you'd like to come through...?"

"What the hell *is* this shit?" I spat at him. I had been anticipating a fight, but obviously they were expecting me... whoever *they* were.

He smiled calmly beneath his moustache. "Take it easy... You've got friends here. In fact, you're kind of a celebrity right now." There seemed no malice in his grin as he motioned me towards the door once more.

After a while I decided to accept; if he had wanted to harm me that zap rod would have done the trick quite nicely. Besides, there was a powerful curiosity tempering my anger now... had I stumbled upon some clandestine organisation? Or a clever trap set by Integrity? However dire the consequence might be, I had to *know*.

The steel door hissed shut behind me, and as we walked along a darkened corridor, my escort allayed at least some of my fears. "Integrity don't know anything at all about this... the engineering corp have managed to seal off a whole section of the ship. It's shielded against scanners, and according to the onboard map there's nothing here but reserve fuel cells." There was an irrepressible note of pride in his voice; then one of warning as he added, "Of course, everyone who passes through that door gains the death sentence if Integrity ever do find out. You hear what I'm saying, Miller?"

"I hear you." Now I was as damned as the mysterious *them*.

We came to what I can only describe as a chamber; internal walls had been removed and equipment rearranged to form a long, wide area. What surprised me was the crowd at the centre - about five or six dozen people, a multicoloured selection of crew uniforms, arranged in a rough circle with everyone facing inwards. All were yelling enthusiastically at whatever their mass concealed from my view, waving their arms and even passing credit chips back and forth in rapid wagering. I couldn't recall the last time I had witnessed such elation, such sheer excitement, particularly on these endless mining voyages.

What had my guide said? *Welcome to the arena*.

He led me forwards into the howling tribe, a few of whom we distracted, but those who bothered to glance at me ... I saw an eager recognition flash in their eyes. I passed techs, engineers, console jockeys, shuttle pilots ... everything but the menacing black regalia of Integrity.

"Christ, half the exex must be here!" I shouted above the tumult.

My escort nodded. "That's partly how we keep it so secret."

I gripped his arm suddenly, transfixed by the sight of the woman in the silver uniform. "Tell me that isn't the commander," I hissed.

"Okay," he replied amiably, "it isn't the commander." He offered a genuine smile. "Must be hallucinating, Miller. Maybe you've been working too hard."

Shouldering our way through the crowd, we soon came to a deep depression in the metal floor, and abruptly I realised what this was; a pit-fight. One of history's most popular and illegal gambling sports; an underground entertainment ring that provided thrills for the jaded spacers. Big money would ride on the outcome between the two vicious dogs, each trained to gouge

and maim the other, to satisfy their audiences' vile palate.

But ... the creatures in the pit were not dogs.

They were like nothing on earth.

Only now can I give an accurate description - at the time, my legs went watery and I very nearly collapsed into that den of horrors, although I think maybe I would have dragged a lot of people in with me. Because the two combatants below were nothing less than monsters; space-age monsters.

Each one was about a metre in length and maybe half a metre high, built low to the ground (which was where any resemblance to a dog ended). They had four legs, arranged in weird X shape beneath the slim torso for maximum balance, each limb tri-joined and terminating in thick pads of muscle that contained short, curved claws. Separate from the legs were the two huge forearms, protruding beneath the bulky shoulders and whirling with devilish speed, their function obvious: killing. The razor-edged talons that flickered in and out looked capable of gutting an elephant.

As for the head, it was lupine in shape, but with a bat's membranous ears and insectile eyes protected beneath an overhang of bone; no gnashing jaws, but what resembled a spider's mandibles, albeit laced with glistening shark's teeth. Neither skin nor fur; the whole hideous body was covered with smooth black chitin, like the carapace of a roach - distorted reflections of the spectator's faces danced on the gleaming surface.

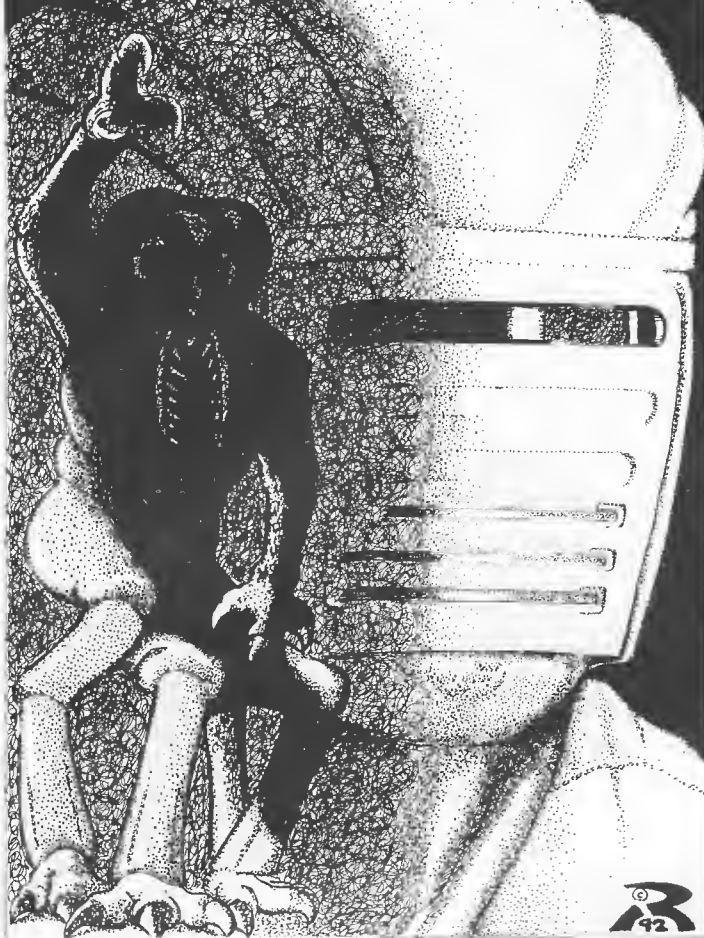
And what really set my guts churning with nausea was the sense of *familiarity* as I watched the contest. They moved almost too fast to register ... circling each other warily, flexing their mandibles, then striking out with mercurial quickness, a blur of black and a streak of silvery claws, eliciting roars of approval from the crowd. They were utterly silent; no pad of feet, no growl of bloodlust, no shriek of pain ... they clashed and tore and shredded each other with unnatural quiet, mute in their murderous efficiency. None of which seemed to surprise me. I knew what they felt.

God help me, I *understood* these beasts.

The time when they would make a noise, I knew, was at the kill - which came quite soon. One of the monstrosities overbalanced its foe and thrust six-inch talons deep into its underbelly, tearing a fatal gash across its length while ravaging its throat. The loser flailed and spasmed in a gushing torrent of blood the colour of milk, a thick and viscous white; and, surpassing in volume even the frenzied screams of the crowd, the victorious creature released a sound ... impossible to translate into words, save for that it flooded my veins with ice water and splashed scalpels down my spine.

As those who I supposed were the handlers of these nightmares leapt down into the pit, a smooth voice by my side jerked me round like a marionette: "Enjoy the show, Joel?"

"Niles," I breathed, struck rigid by the normality of his laconic smile, incongruous amongst all this carnage. For a moment, I felt the siren call of violence, but horror had leached all the enemy from me. "You



eyes ... and then the black-armoured beast moved away, ignoring the human proximity, the expressions of satisfaction or despondence, depending on how they had bet their credit.

"As I was saying," resumed Niles with a cough, "the Chimeras don't need to think because the military use them in the same way they use tanks and fighters - as hardware. Heartbeat and reproduction are automatic, but the rest ... the rest comes from whoever's *inside* the body."

I gasped at him disbelievingly. "You're telling me there's a man's *mind* inside those things?"

"Usually it's a man," he agreed,

smiling that hateful, beatific smile.

What I saw next riddled me with chill gooseflesh. They placed what looked like an incredibly sophisticated PR machine over the malformed head of the Chimera, connected to an indential device ... which was carried over to the pretty blonde woman in the grey uniform. She sat slumped in what was obviously a life-support system, arms limp and lipsticked mouth hanging vacantly open, and oh god I knew her - she was part of my work team in refinement. I *knew* her!

And that lovely statuesque body that I had admired for so long slowly became animated as her consciousness flowed across from the Chimera, which in turn visibly relaxed.

"She had a grudge against some other girl," explained Niles matter-of-factly. "Apparently over a guy they both used to know. So they decided this was the best way to settle it. The punters get their money's worth, and of course the winner gets twenty percent of the profits." He clapped a dark hand to my shoulder. "Just a sideshow, really. It's you and Reese who are the big stars right now."

I whirled on him, reviving my anger. "Reese?"

He heaved that patent Scott Niles sight. "Honestly, Joel, didn't you ever wonder how someone as thick-headed as Reese could ever implant a viral program in your refiner? Let alone hack into your computer file." He beamed at my aghast face. "I think my little contributions helped you two attain the status you have. Everyone here knows about it - they're dying to get both of you down in the pit."

All at once, his manipulation of me became obvious; but instead of shouting at Niles, I turned to watch the mind of the other girl being removed from the monstrous corpse and being transplanted

back into the dark-haired shell it had come from. "So that's what the PR chip was for," I said softly, dejectedly.

He nodded. "A dry run - to get you used to what it's like to be a Chimera. To give you an idea of just how powerful you are when you're wearing those bodies. And you enjoyed it, Joel, as I knew you would." There was no trace of uncertainty in his rich voice. "Some people can't handle the sensory overload ... they struggle against it, and it drives 'em crazy ... guess you've heard all about them. You know why you survived?" His ebony eyes impaled min. "Because you didn't struggle. Because you accepted it."

"Why me?" It seemed the most important question of all.

"You're a fighter, that's why ... a warrior without an arena. Even out here in space, on a ship that feels like a mobile mausoleum, where every move is watched and authorised, you still managed to find an enemy. For you, Joel, an enemy is like oxygen - you *need* it to survive, to keep your mind and body sharp, to motivate you. It's not the winning so much as the duel itself, right? But there's nowhere you can duel ..." He gestured into the gore-stained pit. "... Except here."

Thoughtfully, I gazed down into that theatre of battle, a place of challenge without death ... and as I raised my head, I saw the familiar, brawny figure on the far side. Reese. As our eyes locked over the Chimera's domain, full of animosity as usual, I saw something unexpected; a smile - a tight grin, not of venom, but of satisfaction. Of acceptance.

It wasn't that night, but I suppose the time is quite soon now. The paying customers of that underground auditorium are expectant, eagerly waiting for those of us who have dual identities, dual bodies; one for living, and one for destroying. Niles is fully aware of that, despite my annoyance at the way he used both of us, eventually my curiosity - and my belligerence - will lead my back down to that secret place, where I can finally come face to face with Reese and defend my honour.

Not as a man, but as one of man's monsters.

Hell, what else is there to do on this ship?

DAVID WADE is 23 years old, and although he has submitted a variety of fiction to a variety of magazines, this is his first published work. In addition, his fantasy novel on role playing games is currently with a publisher and he is working on a second book.



bastard. What ...?"

His impassivity halted my questions. "This is my gift to you," he said with that maddening calmness. "It's your big chance ... something that you've always wanted. Time's come for you to make a name for yourself."

Niles grinned whitely - "Your first question," - and gestured below. "They're called Chimeras, aptly enough ... they were designed to blend the most efficient elements of a number of creatures."

"Designed ...?"

"Uh-huh. You don't think critters like that are natural, do you? These babies are part of the U.S. military genetics programme. They use them everywhere from the front line to sentry duty. Kind of the ultimate guard-dog ... they made a big thing about science letting loose the dogs of war and all that. Zombie-hounds, the media call them. That's because they're not really alive."

"They bloody well look alive to me."

He laughs softly. "Nope. About the only living things they do is eat and reproduce, which is a cyclic sort of thing. But they don't exercise, don't sleep, don't respire ... they don't even think."

Before I could digest that, a flurry of activity made me spin round. Down in the pit, the handlers were swarming around the Chimera that had perished, but as for the survivor ... someone had placed a steel ramp on the rim of the makeshift arena, and the creature was *coming up towards us!*

I recoiled in abject terror - god, that thing could tear me to fleshy ribbons before I could say my own name - but the rest of the audience simply shifted aside with a soft murmur. Not with fear, but with reverence ... with respect, as the grotesquerie clambered up the ramp, trailing sticky ooze from its wounds.

Every muscle froze as I watched the loathsome killer pass me by, glimpsing my astonished reflection in its multifaceted



METAL PICNIC

By Mike O'Driscoll

The iron glacier scorched their feet but its dazzling sheen was muted by their wrap-round polaroids. Having traversed the upper slopes they came to the cut and waded into the Big Frothy, letting its cool flow pull them downstream out on to the flat savannah where the wadi widened and levelled out. Gardenia caught Jujube's arm and pulled him up out of the steamy waters on to the bank. They had made good time and should cross the desert before the sun reached its Zenith.

Jujube pointed eastwards to where the raucous vultures rode the eddies that spun off the blue glass and soared over the blistered sand. "Not for us, seen," he said, eyeing them with wonder.

"Not dream with Jesus yet," Gardenia laughed, running on ahead. "C'mon, we make good time fore the heat comes down. Say it's cool in the shadders a them trees, Jube."

"We see." He followed a few metres behind her, his eyes on her back where the faded calico clung sudorifically to her body and felt tenderness and fear sweep through him. It was almost like sex, he thought. He quickened his pace, caught her and took the rucksack from her shoulder and slung it on his own, next to their shotgun.

"Hey!" she said angrily, then, "aright," letting the insult pass, doubting that it was intentional. She could never be sure of Jujube's motivations and doubted that he knew his own mind.

Chunks of shrapnel as long as arms and sharp as her nails vied with the iron flora for their attention. Deliquescent metal fused with rock formed morphological demons and further out where a factory had sunk, ossific machine bones jutted from the ground, their bulks hidden, like their purpose. Pools of liquid plastic swamped the site, bathing it in the colours of an ailing rainbow.

After three hours they rested, drank water and speculated on the wonders of the shiny forest while Gardenia scratched Jujube's chigger scabs, the ones on his back, just out of reach.

When they set off again, Gardenia had the rucksack. As she strode ahead of him, her graceful limbs corroding the distance, Jujube's worries welled up inside. She had the strength but she took

so many risks, what with the thing in her belly that was part of him. He wanted to protect her, had good reason to carry more of their load. But he could never explain it to her.

As the went on, he would stop occasionally to scan the desert, not knowing what he was looking for and dreading what he might find. All morning his unease had been growing stronger, like a tumour whose malign purpose was about exposed. The feeling sickened him but he could not voice his fears. He was unsure how Gardenia would interpret them.

After three more hours, Jujube's polaroids had clouded over with dust sweat. He collapsed less than a kilometre from the forest's edge. Up ahead Gardenia sensed, rather than heard, him fall. She came back to him.

"You gone?" she said. "Look!" She took the polaroids from his face and pointed to where the forest's cobalt towers touched the sky. Half blinded, he made slits of his eyes and followed her finger then caught his breath, stunned by the vision.

"We made now," Gardenia said. "So hang tight your balls yet longer Jube." She helped him up, sensing his shame. She squeezed his arm encouragingly and said no more. He kissed her cheek, then together they walked the last few metres to the gleaming forest.

Immediately she set off in exploration while Jujube took out their coals and ronsoned a small fire. He removed two yams from the rucksack and scrubbed them with his nails. He shoved them into the centre of the fire, then took out two geckoes, skinned and skewered them and held the spit over the flames. He scratched irritably at his stomach and thought of Gardenia and the baby.

Her strength was deceptive, he told himself. Someday, it would fool her, especially with her belly getting big and all. He drank some tepid water from his canteen and studied the trees surrounding the clearing. He could not decipher their meaning. She would know and Igdrasul would look favourably upon them.

A lone zephyr tugged at the flames, startling him; iced, his sluggish blood seemed to cease all movement - for five, ten minutes, he was frozen, an

adamantine gnome, toasting lizards - and then it was only Gardenia who stepped out from the trees not some dryad, seconds, not minutes after the breeze.

"You aright?" she asked. "You looking like dreamtime come, but frightened in the dreaming."

"Gardenia?" he said. "Thought I heard somethin', seen?"

"Worrying again," she taunted.

"No no," he said, embarrassed. "Food's near ready."

"We shoulda done this afore?" Gardenia said as she sat across the fire from him. "Come eat here with Igdrasul."

"You fine him yet?"

"No, but I see a man-wadi back there," she said, indicating with her thumb the direction she meant. "Go see huh?"

"After. Eat now Gardenia, rest fore the big heat come."

"You bushed still?" Gardenia said. "Lookit Jube, you bushed is fine but don't crowd it on me."

"But what about the-"

"Shaddup Jube. Jesus, best for me and my body is my knowing and I don't catch no problem with that. You saying you catch it better'n me, or you think I'm hag now?"

"Polgise, didn't mean to cast no-"

"No member, it's said and gone. Next time you mention it, you catch this first." She tapped her forehead. "Then you know the right thing to speak."

Silenced, Jujube carried on oasting the geckoes. Sensing his hurt, she crawled round the fire and kissed him hard on the mouth. He unskewered the lizards, got the yams from the fire and served them on plastic plates while Gardenia kicked sand on the fire, killing it. With closed eyes she hurried through the words of Grace, then gratefully, they tore into the meat.

Putting the last of the crisp yamskin in his mouth, Jujube suggested they find shelter.

"We got time yet," Gardenia said, licking juice from her fingers. "See where the man-wadi goes first. Nice meat, Jube."

"Yeah," he said, still chewing. He wrapped the still hot coals in their clay sheaths and stashed them in the rucksack. Following her into the trees, he said: "Where all them shadders you was saying about?"

"Sun's gonna peak soon," she said, gazing skyward. "Maybe Igdrasul poorly cos ain't no leaves to make shadders."

"Seen," he said without seeing, "but not understand."

"As I tole you, this the Mad Forest. I heard about it long fore I met you Jube. Up north is like everything written down."

"Seen, but my tribe don't have written down."

"I know it, but tribe we make gonna have it. These trees go deeper than they tall, deep called roots and Igdrasul's roots go right through the world. What we do here, offering we make, is noted by Igdrasul. I seen it written down in the testaments."

The heat of the sun made Jujube



uneasy. He walked in her tracks, gazing up at the smooth, shiny trunks that soared twenty metres or more into the air. Some were adorned with massive fins while others had succumbed to the red disease that ate their bark and exposed their knotted innards, leaving them crumbling in the hot, still air. He felt saddened and could not explain why.

"If we lucky," Gardenia went on, "we fine some Neutrons which testaments say bring Hand a Jesus to touch us."

He followed her round a sharp turn at a concrete building and saw the canal. They walked beside it to where it spilled out into a wide, clear lake. "Sweet dreaming Jesus," he swore as he stared out at the cool water.

"The best site yet," Gardenia agreed. She ran down to the water's edge, pulled the sun-bleached calico dress up over her head, threw it aside and dived into the lake.

Appalled, Jujube ran to the shore and peered frantically at the clear water, waiting for her to surface. His heart pounded in its cavity as she failed to materialise. His eyes were drawn through the heat-haze to the far shore, where shapes seemed to separate from shiny trunks and glide across the water. Stillness and motion blurred, confusing him. He wanted to run. Then, when the ripples had stilled he saw her clearly as she knifed elegantly through the crystal deep. He was transfixed by her alien beauty and almost convinced that he had put something good in her belly.

The light cutting through the water made her look the way she had when he first saw her, though she was darker now, naturally. It was a mirror world down there, another forest with doppelgangers of Gardenia and himself. Maybe a better world. His scabs itched, making him see the drowned world for what it was: cold as death, without the real touch of the sun. He removed his trousers, unslung the shotgun and waded out, wondering if his soot coloured form would be lost forever in its depths.

Cool water soothed his flesh, deflected the rays. Beneath the surface he saw Gardenia, her flesh turned blue as she circled towards him, hair writhing round her head; her limbs moving with such effortless grace that he felt awkward and clumsy, like a drowning dog. He kicked back towards the shore.

She caught his foot and tugged him down, spun him in the water and encircled him in her arms. His momentary panic vanished as he felt her lips touch his. Laughing, he lost his air, twisted from her embrace and swam to the surface. Habit made him scan the horizon. What had he seen on the far shore? Sunshine glistened harmlessly on the trees.

They played in the water for an hour while the sun reached its zenith and began to slide. When the shadows had crept out more than a metre from the base of the trees they swam ashore, laid down in the newly cooling shade and made their offering to Igdrasul.

Afterwards, with her head resting on their clothes, Gardenia stroked her stomach proudly and said, "It's gonna be well now Jube, we showed him and he seen."

Lying at her side, facing her, he said: "Long now?"

"Not sure. Thirty days, more. This new for me, Jube."

"You be aright?" he asked, afraid. He had assumed that she had been taught the ways of birthing.

"Thank you, Jube," she said, mistaking his question for reassurance. "You see it fore?"

"No," he lied, "not the Maculate Deception."

"Well," she sighed, "Jesus seeing out

for us for sure."

Minutes passed by slowly. Gardenia began to doze. Glad to see her resting, Jujube lay in silence at her side, unable to sleep and hating himself for what he might have done to her. So many times he had tried to tell her the truth but had floundered, too afraid of what it would mean.

She was his second woman and this would be his second child. He should have told her. Told her about Mnome and how she had got a sickness during the birthing, how her breasts had shrivelled and yielded no milk. How she could not eat and how he had forced her to, only to see her puke it up. How her eyes whitened and wept tears of soured cream, blinding her so she had been spared the sight of the pathetic child with his swollen stomach and distended limbs. How she had refused to let him return to their home-tribe to seek help and how he had hacked a grave for her high in the glass, then wandered for days with his son who was no more than bones. How he might have saved the child had he returned to the tribe, but his sense of the shame was too much to bear, so instead in desperation, he had held the child to his own breast and tried to make it suck, knowing the futility of what he did but hoping for a miracle from the baby Jesus. How he had screamed and cursed Jesus when his son had finally died - too small to even have a name, so no one would ever know or remember him. How he buried his son, cried bitter tears over the grave and named him anyway; named him Emile, swearing he would remember him always because he would never have another child. And how, after months of tormented wandering he had forgotten him after all, Mnome too, forced himself to cauterise those memories because he could no longer live that pain or that guilt.

He should have told Gardenia when she found him in the Northern Lava swamps, but he had not, because he remembered nothing. And so committed no sin in seizing a second chance, and persuading her to leave her tribe and go South with him.

But when she had caught, why had it all come back to haunt him? And worse, the bitterest sin of all, why then had he not confessed? Admitted that yes, he had seen the Maculate Deception and all it did was snatch away the ones he had loved?

One day he knew, his home-tribe would send out an emissary to find him and Mnome, to find their tribe. And when they discovered the truth even Igdrasul's forest would provide no sanctuary against the Council of Popes.

Lying there, he found the strength to admit to himself what it all meant. The Council of Popes would find her another mate and the bad seed that was inside her would not be allowed to perpetuate. Above all, the truth meant that he would lose her.

There was a thought that had imprinted itself on his mind when Gardenia had caught. What if he had caused Mnome's sickness? If it was his seed that had killed

her? She had been a strong, vigorous woman before he put Emile inside her; afterwards, her decay had been swift and brutal. But why was he still living? And what did this mean? It meant that he could never be sure, either way.

It would have been better if he had never been chosen as a tribe father; the task had been beyond him. Now all he wanted was Gardenia and their child and all he could do was wait and hope God would let him have his peace.

"Jube," Gardenia called, rousing him. "Shanks mare time." She had pulled on her dress and was ready for the journey home. He stared at her stomach, trying to see what was in there. The whole Maculate Deception was a lie, he told himself, because he had seen what it did. The blasphemous thought faded from his mind, usurped by his inner turmoil; the truth that told him he had no faith in her love, no faith in anything.

"Why don't we stay longer?" he said weakly, pulling on his clothes. "We know this place, we have what we need here." He felt, though he did not know why, that the forest was safe.

"Snice yeah, but we ain't had no dark yet here, or how cold it get to be," Gardenia said. She gazed westward through the looming spires. "Seven, eight hours, no more til the dark come down. We leave now Jube, we make good time."

"But why? We got-"

"Hell, Jube," she cut him short. "You gone dreamtime? I know the best for me and baby. Here is too much risk, so please, for me, huh? And when we know place here better, then ..." The anger drained from her. She knew how weak

he could be but he was still the father of her child. She had left her own people freely and had no desire to return. She and Jujube would start their own tribe and if his strength was sufficient only for himself, then she would sustain the tribe with her own; they would survive.

As they walked back through the forest, Gardenia spoke about other forests she had known. "You fine some got ten thousand trees in them high as the grass. I seen one like that but too long ago; I don't see it right no more. What woun't you give, Jube, to see them just one time?"

"I woun't give you."

"I mean," she continued without really having heard him, "take Igdrasul; roots that come out on other side of the world and kiss the air; it bind all things together, sky and forests, mountains and water, night and day; it shoot up branches that mogrify the night with patterns a deployment; it reach out to the stars where they got the one eye that shows the new spring that will come one day and wipe them deserts clean; from its timber they cut the cross that the baby Jesus have on his back when he went up the sky where the Holy Christ was revealed to him and ..."

"Well I like it here," Jujube interrupted.

"... and ... I'm sorry, Jube, I know you do."

They came out of the forest and she saw him first. She grabbed Jujube's arm and squeezed. Jujube saw him then.

The sun glistened off an ornate silver crucifix that hung from his neck. Jujube has to squint. Fear and heat drained him.

He knew the face but not the name that went with it. The man's hair was braided with coloured beads and piled in a mound on top of his head; two darts criss-crossed through the mound, holding it in place; a crossbow hung from his back while bullet belts with four knives stuck in them were draped across his chest; a rifle was cradled in his arms; his thigh length boots left room to display the scarlet pouch he wore, which was adorned with the figures of children.

Nausea welled up inside Jujube. He knew what this meant and could not bear to see the realisation on Gardenia's face.

"Many days, Jujube," the man said, raising his rifle to chest level as he stepped forward. "Many days I seeking you tribe. Over here, both a you." He

waved them out from the edge of the forest.

"I goes under Ondekai, woman," he said. "From Council a Popes. You ain't Mnome."

"She's" Jujube began but Ondekai silenced him with a sharp jab of his rifle butt. Jujube sank to his knees, retching.

"No talk yet, Jujube," Ondekai said, grabbing the shotgun from Jujube's shoulders and backing away. "Step over here woman. What you go by?"

"Gardenia," she said, following Ondekai.

"You long with him?"

"Long," she said, confused.

"Long," Ondekai laughed. "But you know Mnome?"

"No. Who is..."

"I tole her nothing," Jujube interrupted.

"You got urge to talk?" Ondekai said. "Where Mnome?"

Jujube said nothing.

"I seen where you put her in the glass, Jujube."

"She died, there don't be nothing more to say."

"It ain't that easy," Ondekai said contemptuously. "You got tribe failure - so what you doing with woman Gardenia?"

"That was a long time ago, Ondekai, I..." he faltered, seeing Gardenia slip from his grasp and still he could not look at her.

"Guilt stain you, Jujube," Ondekai said, turning to Gardenia. "You caught ain't you? Long gone?"

"More'n half," she said but her eyes were on Jujube. His polaroids had slipped from his face and his eyes were tight in anguish. She was appalled but she thought she understood.

"There be time still then," Ondekai continued. "My tribe still need good women. We rip it out fore it petuates and fine you new man. I take you for mine, but my three wives been chosen and caught and delivered of seven child tween them."

"Rip it out?" Gardenia said, her voice a hoarse whisper.

"No fear," Ondekai said. He put Jujube's shotgun down and fed bullets into his own rifle. "He carrying tribe failure. This the true Jujube. Mnome was good woman, I vouch. His seed do her bad, child bad. Maculate Deception say he have no more woman, no second chance."

"How many other child bad, Ondekai?" Jujube said bitterly.

"No matter for you. Only concern is yours bad Jujube, and you run from it and steal second woman. Jesus put Maculate Deception here for good reason. Is law."

"Maculate Deception is wrong," Jujube persisted. "You have three women and child by them but what if'n one your child turns out bad? What gone done then Ondekai? What Jesus say than?"

"Blaspheme now but wrong you are. You wanting of more woman when first one dead? Holy Trinity don't work that way - it seen the bad in your balls and it my duty to make this woman see that poison." Ondekai snapped the loaded



rifle clip into place.

"How can child be bad?" Gardenia said.

"I not know your tribe, woman Gardenia," Ondekai said. "But must be you have Baby Jesus."

"Seen, but Jube make good child and my choice to birth it."

"He corrupt mind, well as your flesh. No fear, Good Father put you right." He walked to where Jujube was kneeling.

"What you doing?" Gardenia asked, seeing part of it now. Jujube's other woman, his dead woman. *How did she die? Why had Jujube never told her about it? Had he deliberately deceived her?* Feelings of disgust and resentment welled up inside her.

"Sentence be clear enough," Ondekai said coldly. "Jujube gone now, true? Sacred to do him here than take him back. Tribe is many day south and Council a Popes invest in me the Vine Retrivenge a Jesus."

"Say you gonna kill him?" Gardenia said, understanding in full the implications of Jujube's crime.

"He broken Law a Maculate Deception and by power of Vine Retrivenge stowed on me, I send him to meet with the Baby Jesus for Him to do as he will." Ondekai stepped forward and placed the barrel of his rifle against Jujube's head.

Without hesitation Gardenia stooped, grabbed the shotgun and shot Ondekai in the back.

Six hours later they had reached the glacier and were following the Big Frothy back up the glass. Leading, Jujube

sensed the absence of Gardenia and panicked. He spun round and saw her about one hundred metres below, lying on her stomach, motionless.

"Gardenia," he called, half-running, half-stumbling down the slope.

"Is okay," she said when he reached her side. "Got sick is all, normal, when carrying, seen."

The pool of red vomit beside her did not convince him. He was cold and tired and had been too scared to talk since she had killed Ondekai. What could he say or do for her now? What was the right thing?

"Home is less than an hour," he said finally, in a voice that did not seem his own. "I carry you."

"No," she said. "Please Jube, I aright. Sit awhile, rest."

He sank to the ground beside her and stared out across the desert to the east. He took the shotgun from her back and laid it on the glass. He tried not to think of it by imagining the early starlight dancing off the forest's steel trunks. Did the trees glow at night? Maybe Igdrasul watched over them after all.

"You aright," Gardenia asked sitting up.

"Yeah," Jujube said, taking pride in her strength. She slid down in front of him and then backed up between his legs.

"Hey!" he said, laughing. "What you seen?"

"Jube?" she said, smiling over her shoulder at him.

"What?" He caught her smile and felt fear leave him.

"My back, seen?" she said. "You scratch it for me?"

MIKE O'DRISCOLL tells us that he is currently burdened with ownership of a video shop in decline. He has been writing for nearly ten years, but was first published only two years ago, in "WORKS". Since then, he's had stories published in "FEAR", "BBR", and "WORKS" again with more to come in other small press magazines. He lives with his wife and daughter in Swansea, but originates from West Cork. He often asks himself if these are appropriate qualifications for a science fiction writer, but as yet doesn't know the answer to that question.



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A SUBSTITUTE FOR LOVE

by
Del B. Normanton

Continued from Issue 3 . .

Mr Dinkie shielded his eyes from the painful glare of artificial light, which burned fiercely cruel in its intensity. With his eyes pinched shut, he took a few hesitant steps forward.

At last! he thought. I finally have something of my own that no one can lay claim to, something which will release me from this loathsome hum-drum existence, this leaden blanket of misery that lies heavily upon my heart, suffocating me, crushing me.

Ah, to be awakened! To be involved again with life!

The room was so bright that the light became, instead, a darkness filled with shifting shapes and mottled colours. Seeking to traverse this darkness of light, he stumbled and fell against an object which toppled over and rolled. He steeled himself against the sound of breaking glass, which seemed to take forever:

CRASH !

Inside, he screamed. He struggled to open his eyes, but the blaze of light playing on his eyelids prevented him. Through the slit-like apertures he had torn in his face the light filled him like a vessel.

He seemed to be on the set of someone's dream.

Every wall, every warped surface and table-top in the brightly illuminated kitchen seemed to radiate an eerie and unnatural light. Every stain, every footprint had been swept up or wiped away, there was not a speck of dust anywhere, although the room was alive with static, pregnant with energy.

There were things in that cold, colourless kitchen which writhed and scowled as he passed; a kettle snapped at him irascibly; knives, forks and spoons, bearing equally piqued expressions, made gnarled gestures at his passing; the door, which had been left ajar, grimaced sourly, and an old hunchbacked table stepped reluctantly aside for him, muttering curses as the four club-footed chairs re-arranged themselves once more beneath her skirt. A rather grim looking toast rack reared up and glared at him as he passed. Two slices of toast stood in the rack - one cut into the shape of a bride, the other into a

groom; beneath them in illuminated letters were printed the words: 'Toasted in my mother's toaster'.

Beside the toaster lurched a bottle of wine, hiccupping and giggling sheepishly. The two hare-lipped glasses at its side looked on and frowned. They were, as usual, unamused by the bottle's drunken frolics. This only made the wine bottle laugh more. He reeled about drunkenly, spluttering and spraying wine and spittle at them until, snorting peevishly, they moved away.

"Oh don't go!" giggled the wine bottle, hurrying after them. "Please don't leave."

Looking on, Mr Dinkie tittered; the wine bottle guffawed. In an attempt to cork itself the wine bottle, ashamed and out of control, was unable to stifle a last giggle.

"Tee-hee! Oops!"

A sharp emanation from the other side of the room silenced them all and Mr Dinkie turned to see a mysterious, illuminated woman with her back towards him, washing up at a sink. She was washing up lighted lightbulbs, while humming a tune he thought he recognised.

Pulling a lightbulb from the soapy water in a shower of sparks, she threw it down amongst the others; bright blue sparks zipped and crackled along the white enamel-topped surface of the draining-board.

As with everything else in the white kitchen, she wore only white - a white dress through which her flesh shone, it being whiter than the fabric of her gown, and white shoes. Even her hair was white, a silent waterfall of lemonade, alive with static, which spread itself across the milk-white flesh of her back.

He felt a rushing, a warmth within him he had never felt before and supposed it to be love. Here before him was a flower, so fresh, so white, for him to pluck - or not to pluck as was his want; to savour its sweet perfume, to sample its delicious nectar.

He felt like a stowaway and wondered what she would say when she found him lurking behind her. He took a step towards her as she plunged her hands once more into the water, as sparks flew in all directions.

She looked up then, suddenly aware of his presence, and turned, Her eyes

burning fiercely into him. She ran her tongue over her lips, watching him. When he saw her tongue, warm and red, the only thing in the room besides himself that was not white, he felt strangely drawn towards it.

Removing her hands from the water, she reached out to him a hand charged with electricity, which spat and crackled.

But a hyena cackle, arched upon her assuasive smile, unnerved him; he thought he read treachery in her cold, vacant stare and, for a moment, he grew suspicious of her, of her motives for inviting him and her intentions.

He hesitated, drew away from her outstretched hand. Something was not quite right. Veins wriggled excitedly beneath her white, white skin, anticipating his touch.

"Is it you?" he whispered. "Can it really be you?"

Her smile faltered in its anonymity, clung desperately to her face for a moment, then faded. The room dimmed as lights went out one by one, and articles that once were white grew dull and grey, dying with her smile.

He was losing her!

Mr Dinkie smiled to retrieve her smile. He dared not lose her now; she might reject him, throw him back out there! He held out his hand to her and she was upon him in an instant, fingers enfolding his, eyes rolling blissfully, teeth grinding together in a secret ecstasy.

His skin zipped and popped, attempting to crawl away from her. His bones cracked, his hair whooped and frizzed. Her touch was ice. Appalled by her fierce coldness, he began to shiver, growing cold himself. She excited him, repelled him; he clung to her.

"I'm alive!" he whispered into her shock of white hair. "Really alive!"

He grew colder, his flesh paled, while her cheeks grew red. Her smile warmed as if by a potent ruddy wine, and she took on a healthy, roseate glow. Presently, his knees buckled under him and he fell at her feet; only then did she release him.

Even the room, swimming before him, had warmed to him.

The table warmed to mahogany, the floor coloured itself even as he watched; yellow and green swirls splashed

beneath him. The walls, which had been so painfully white, closed in on him now with their brightening colours.

It seems *he* was the only white object in the room now.

The affable wooden colossus, to which Blackheath clung like a grub, tip-toed lightly across the kitchen to the larder, trying to blend in with the domestic appliances as it passed.

Yet it was a hideous, misshapen tower, crook-backed, gaunt and knobby-kneed, swathed in notches and bristles and wearing a permanent scowl; long grey tresses had been tied up in a rather inelegant topknot, to which Blackheath now clung.

Only its purple carpet slippers blended in.

"I don't like all this piracy," whispered the wooden tower, taking furtive glances around the room. "Don't like it at all. Why don't we just tell your mother you're hungry and you want something to eat."

"Ha!" scoffed Blackheath, caged within the confines of the tower. "She would evict me from the kitchen in a moment. This is her domain; and she guards it with her own life. I think she would rather see me starve, than eat."

Leaning forward, the tower reached out a gnarled hand and pulled open the larder door. Peering inside, Blackheath could see the stone steps leading up into the darkness.

"Oh, dear," he whispered. "The food is upstairs. It looks as if we'll have to go further."

The wooden tower prepared to enter the darkness, but even as it raised its foot, the wicked food began to scream.

Panic-stricken, the wooden tower looked about nervously. Blackheath whispered for it to hurry, before his mother arrived. But as he climbed the stairs, peeling away the darkness, the screams of the wicked food grew more shrill, thwarting their attempt to capture them.

At the top of the stairs, he came face to face with rows of tiny, frightened faces, staring back at him from the darkness. As he reached out for them, they screamed louder.

"Eek! Mrs Dinkie! He's going to eat us! Stop! Stop, you brute!"

Startled by the shrieking food, Blackheath reached, instead, for a bottle of milk, which instantly screamed and curdled with fright.

"Stop that! Ohh, Mrs Dinkie! You'll never guess what he's doing now! He's stealing your milk! Help! Mrs Dinkie! Eek! Eek!"

Suddenly, his mother was beside him, wielding a sharp knife. She began to climb up the gnarled wooden tower to get to her son.

The bottle of milk fell to the floor and smashed.

"Eek!" cried the food, jumping up and down in the larder. "He means to kill us all!"

"He's murdered poor milk! We'll be next!" cried the wicked food. "Kill him, Mrs Dinkie! Kill him!"

"But it was an accident!" he cried. "It just slipped!"

Tears welling up in his mother's eyes as she fell to the floor and kissed the spilt milk.

"You killed it!" she wept, touching the white puddle tenderly with her fingertips. "You killed the milk!" She looked up, tears glistening on her cheeks. "I hate you, Blackheath. Get out of my kitchen now - or I'll run you through with this!"

"Kill him, Mrs Dinkie!" screamed the wicked food. "Kill Him! Quick!"

"I can't feed off my own son! This is monstrous!"

"If you wish to survive," she said, turning to face him, sparks flying, her lemonade hair zipping and popping with static, "then you must. Take the boy; take him. Drink only what you need and no more, and you will not harm him. There are things you must know, things which are important; things that every furniture vampire should know. Seek me out when you are hungry and we will talk."

But I don't want to go back! he thought. *I have just got here! I don't ever want to go back!*

Blackheath held on as the gnarled and twisted tower turned and fled down the dark stairs. As he emerged in the brightly lit kitchen, a whirlwind of household articles suddenly leaped up, joining forces in the air and swirling about wildly.

His mother, who had followed him down the stairs, took one look at the pandemonium in the air and, fearing she would be struck on the head again, dived beneath the rickety legs of her son's tower.

Cups, plates, frying pans and saucepans crashed and collided in mid-air, and in the midst of it Blackheath thought he recognised the scratched, broken malevolent mask of the Outdoor Witch.

"Who is that woman?" cried Mrs Dinkie, cowering beneath the legs of his tower.



"Who am I?" cried the Outdoor Witch. "You, of all people, should know who I am! After all, it was you who invited me!"

"Me?" cried Mrs Dinkie. "I never did! Why, I don't even know you. Put my kitchen down this instant and leave my house!"

The mask followed Mrs Dinkie with her eyes as she scrambled further beneath the legs of her son's tower.

"As you have stolen my precious plaything - the un-seagull - I shall claim you as my new toys. You, and this house, are now mine!"

The mask turned and followed the seagull through the wall. And only after it was gone did everything come crashing to the floor.

"Mother," gasped Blackheath hurrying into the living-room on his lofty, skeletal tower. "Whatever are we going to do? I think she means to kill us all!"

Mrs Dinkie looked up sluggishly and smiled a crooked smile. "Nonsense," she said. "You heard her. She's going to play with us. I suppose it could be worse."

"But what are we to do?"

"You created her," replied his mother with a shrug. "That's your problem. I'm off to secure the kitchen against a further attack. But I'll tell you this for nothing - if she doesn't kill you, I will!"

Hiding briefly in the folds of the curtains, Mr Dinkie moved out amongst the silent, drifting motes and crossed the room to a shadow cast by an armchair.

The hushed voices of others like himself reached him from the secret realms within the armchair, where he



musical laughter beckoned him, yet he held back, fearing that, instead of welcoming him, they might attack him.

They had been furniture vampires for many years - centuries, perhaps - and knew all the secrets of their twilight world, their lifestyle, where to sleep, how to avoid daylight.

Whereas, he was only a novice. He had everything to learn, and knew next to nothing of the world he was now a part of.

Oh, misery! Oh, despair! What a fiend I have become!

Cloaked in the darkness at the top of the stairs, cobwebs twisted in his hair as he listened to the sound of his wife's snores emanating from the bedroom, wishing that he too could sleep. But a gnawing hunger kept him awake.

He moved from shadow to shadow undetected, vigilant, yet uncertain, the silent darkness of night merging with his own ultimate darkness. He breathed whenever he wanted to now, by habit, not by necessity.

Shifting his atoms, as he had been shown and which he found he could do effortlessly, he became a mere blur to the inquisitive eyes of the dog, who watched him cautiously. His temperature increased, his cells bombarded each other until there was a silent explosion and he demolecularised, turning instantly to vapour.

He passed beneath the closed door, entering his son's bedroom in a vapourised form, to stand, silent and unobserved, amidst the trailing cobwebs

that moved sluggishly inside the room.

Blackheath lay on the bed, a dead seagull draped over him like an eiderdown. He was asleep.

As Mr Dinkie stared down at him, he felt a mixture of sadness, at knowing that in his son lay his only source of nutriment, and relief at discovering him so quickly and easily. But these feelings were soon forgotten as the hunger burned within him, propelling him towards the bed.

He had fought the hunger for as long as he dared: his skin had taken on a pale translucency through which he could see his watery veins

wriggling hungrily. He was frail and weak, and could wait no longer.

Starvation is a painful and terrible death for a furniture vampire; their last hours are spent writhing in agony as their strength is sapped, their bones and muscles crumble into dust beneath the skin. Already, he had grown pale and gaunt and one of his shoulders had disintegrated inside him, filling him with dust, which caused him to cough and exhaust himself easily.

But the suspicion that other furniture vampires might be about to dine on his son's blood convinced him that tonight he would feed.

Better I get to it before some predatory stranger!

It will be good not to waken with a start, ridden with hunger pangs, at the chiming of a clock or the creak of a floorboard; to sleep peacefully amongst the dust motes, wrapped in a shadow until I can

find my own piece of furniture in which to make my home.

Studying Blackheath with one serious, cold eye, he envied him his life. His warm son filled with hot, pulsing veins of blood; his blood-filled son. Dark, pulsating veins that I might walk down, licking the wet walls...

The very thought of it caused in him a terrible desire, which both puzzled and excited him. Yet it repulsed him and he grew afraid of that desire.

He tried to remember all that he had been told by the furniture vampire, but his contempt for her impaired his thoughts and he found himself unable to concentrate; whenever he thought of her he found himself hating her for what she had done to him. She had fooled him into believing that living in the limbo of their twilight world between life and death was preferable, eternal and beautiful; and her talk of wild bladder parties, dancing in the heart chamber until all hours, had all been lies.

What a fool he had been to believe her!

The world of the furniture vampire is one of loneliness in which thieves and murderers skulk in the shadows, hiding from daylight, fearing discovery by the outside world, which has always been unaware of their existence. Sucking up a child's last breath to keep themselves alive for a few more hours, draining its blood quietly, like a mosquito.

Furniture vampires, like some insects, are present in all furniture - the arms of chairs, inside sofas and bureaux, even in modern furniture, in which they hide to shield themselves from the harmful rays



of the sun, and where they feast upon the blood of young or unborn children to nourish them.

Reducing themselves to a mere vapour, they enter at the penis, vagina or rectum, travel sleepily through the warm urine or stools until they reach the bladder or bowel. There, they seek out a vein that will lead them to the heart, where they linger to drink the warm blood. They eventually leave just before morning, drunk and giggly.

Or they may spirit the child away altogether, taking them down into the furniture. Many children disappear each year, stolen in this way and they are never seen again.

Life as a furniture vampire is not as much fun as she led him to believe. In fact, he decided, *in my experience, it is no fun at all!*

Nor can it be very pleasant for the unfortunate child who is host to them. Waking up crying in the middle of the night, unable to sleep because of the noises within him - the pounding of a hundred pairs of feet echoing down his veins, the screaming, the laughter and the infernal chatter as the furniture vampires dance and sing, drunk on his blood.

In young children, it seems, the flow of urine from the bladder is entirely reflex. But as they grow older, it is controlled consciously, and furniture vampires are no longer able to enter by this method.

But how old was his son? he wondered. He should be about twelve years old, yet he looked strangely older.

Older, even, than I! he thought.

Mr Dinkie did not want his son to experience this, but for two nights starvation had been gnawing away at him. And he had been unable to stop thinking of the warm blood pulsing through his son's veins.

It *had* to be him. And it had to be tonight.

Drip! Drip! Drip!

How disgusting! he thought, splashing about in the shallows. I am a parasite! A pariah! Who would have thought that I would be paddling about in my son's bladder like a common thief!

As he swam through the warm urine, chasing shadows up the walls on his journey towards the capillary mouth, the warnings of the old furniture vampires echoed clearly in his mind.

"It is dangerous to get lost in a capillary for there are over a thousand miles of them. It is also unwise to overindulge oneself, as it is sometimes very difficult, when the capillaries are contracted due to severe loss of blood, for a drunken, bloated furniture vampire to squeeze back down them again. Seek out the vein that leads to the heart; avoid the capillaries."

He would steal only a few drops - just enough to sustain him through the night. *Just as much as I need, and no more.*

The body is able to make it up in a few hours and it wasn't like murder or anything as grisly as that.

After all, he was a furniture vampire now. A pale and ghastly furniture vampire. And he was far too hungry to hesitate any longer. A vampire cannot have a conscience and survive.

Yet he hated to do this to his own son, but it had to be a child - and there was no other.

Finding himself engulfed by darkness, he sighed away his regrets and, holding the chandelier aloft, swam with the tide.

The taste of warm, young blood excited him, enticing him from the capillary to the vein, down which he swam, clutching the chandelier that he would hang in the heart chamber to enable him to see while he fed.

"Ah, plasmal!" he cried. "Nourishment!" The echo of his voice made him giggle as he stood on the threshold of the heart.

All his fears and regrets were soon forgotten as he entered the heart. Hanging the chandelier above him, illuminating the twisted chamber, he set to work. Unwrapping the long, sharp knives and forks and pins, which the furniture vampire had given him, he began to rip and tear frenziedly at his son's heart to encourage the flow of blood.

As he toiled away, he remembered the poem that she had whispered to him as she drained him of life:

*"In the unexplored depths of my heart,
I discovered there a beast.
But for a night it slept;
On the blood of my veins it feast'd.
I screamed at my soul to flee,
For every heart has a cellar,
And every cellar a heart.
Mine moved uncomfortable in my flesh;
My flesh shifted in my shirt.
A liar's bones of dust and splinter
Trading summer days for winter."*

He laboured for almost ten minutes, plunging the blades deep into the muscle walls, twisting them furiously until a gushing tide of warm, frothy blood swept over him and he was in ecstasy...

Then he drank greedily, his strength



returning and the promise to take only as much as he needed forgotten as the taste became an obsession.

Eventually, the splashing of the blood became a trickle; the trickle became a drip that no longer dripped. His clothes were saturated, his eyes rolling drunkenly, and he lay giggling in the empty chamber of his son's heart until the last drop of blood had dripped into his open mouth.

When he was certain that no more remained, he stood up and stretched sleepily. I feel so full! he thought, staring round at the shadows that crept up the empty cavern walls.

Then he began plucking the bloody knives from his son's heart. Gathering up the rest of his tools, he carefully wrapped them up and returned them to his jacket pocket. It was only at this moment that he remembered his promise not to overindulge himself.

He stared around at his son's heart, which was silent and still, beat no more. Blood was drying on the walls, the floor.

What had happened to him? he wondered, horrified. Was he mad? He had murdered his own son!

Turning, he stumbled blindly down the vein leading back to the bladder. The chandelier illuminated the dark corridor before him and down which his lonely sighs hurried off to play with their echoes.

"Oh, dear!" he thought. "I wish I hadn't drank so much. I hadn't realised that he had so little blood. I would never have consumed so much if I had known."

Hearing a splashing sound behind him, he turned. *Blood?* he wondered. He

hoped.

But it was laughter.

Hurrying along the dark vein towards him, the glass chandelier pendants on her religious dress chiming musically, as she approached, was his wife, Mrs Dinkie!

"Well!" she said, "You're a crafty old bugger, you are!" she said. "You might have left a little for me!

"What are you doing in here?" he gasped, clasping the tinkling chandelier to his chest and trying to wipe the caked blood from his hands, his face, his suit.

"Just dusting," she replied with a forbidding smile.

He backed away from her. "What do you mean? You can't be here! You can't! I'm a vampire! This," he cried, pointing about him, "is my son! I'm in his vein! I've just finished feeding on his blood! In fact, I think I've killed him! You can't be here! You can't!"

His wife shook a finger at him and smiled deviously. "But I am, aren't I?" she chuckled. "I am here."

He pushed past her. Dropping the chandelier, he ran off down the vein, his shadows pursuing him until he was enveloped by the darkness.

"Is there *no* escaping her?" he cried, stumbling along in the darkness. "She's a monster! A monster! More unholy than I!"

He blundered down veins and capillaries, turning corners blindly, unable to tell one from the other. Plunging

through the darkness, he did not notice the veins growing narrower. Clawing his way down a particularly tight vein, he suddenly realised, to his horror, that it was not a vein at all.

He was in the capillaries!

He fought against the capillary walls, which, without the blood to swell them, were collapsing about him, imprisoning him forever. He tried to turn, but found himself trapped; he was able to go neither forward nor back.

He wished now that he had heeded the furniture vampire's warning. She told him to take only as much as he needed. But how much was that? he asked himself. He had no idea.

He had wanted it all. Like an avaricious blackmailer, or Narcissus, drunk upon the beauty of his own reflection, he had gorged himself until he was unable to move. He should have taken only a modest amount as his first meal, for he was an addict - or would have been; a debauched, nocturnal habitue of children's veins.

"I did not know!" he cried, fighting off the collapsed capillary walls that closed about him. "I did not know the manners and customs of these

people! Please! Someone help me!"

But who would hear him? He was buried deep inside his son's body. And his son was dead! This was his tomb, he realised. He had buried himself alive in his son's vein.

Then he began to scream.

Mrs Dinkie threw away the bones. She sorted through the soft bits to see if there was anything interesting she could use. She had no idea where her husband was. *Well*, she thought. *Not to worry. He'll be around when he's hungry.*

Carefully ironing the skin-bag, she folded it neatly up and put it away.

With the others.



DB NORMANTON

Del Normanton is 38, has a full time job and has been writing and illustrating for many years. "A Substitute for Love" is taken from his first unpublished novel "The Trunk of the Hagflower", and is his first published short story. He also illustrated this story and in his spare time he enjoys listening to classical music, Ska and Rock Steady.

TO YOU

*O Starlit life-form;
Carbon mound.
Planet-tied;
Spirit-bound.*

*Prisoners all,
Too blind to see
A way ahead;
The mental key.*

*In narrow spectrumed
Sight and sound,
Precious few
Have sought and found,*

*Those words beyond
A blinkered mind.
There's more; and more,
Than humankind ...*

FROM ME.

By Julia Ann Lucie

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The CHARACTER who was REAL

By Peter Reveley

How are the characters in a story defined? What makes them recognisable as individuals?

Whence are derived their traits and habits, their idiosyncracies, their... well, their *characters*?

One widely-accepted theory is that the writers themselves determine these qualities; that it is from the scribes' fervid imaginations that spring the personalities inhabiting their works; that characters are solely and wholly the creations of their originator. Observation, however, is enough to persuade the impartial that this is not, in fact, the case; by their very nature authors tend, on the whole, to possess a modicum more imagination than their uncreative contemporaries, but this is rarely manifested in the characters they conceive. These are, in the most part, a pretty uninspired bunch, not lacking in personality as much as having little or no imagination invested in the creation of such; and this serves as a demonstration of how writers are shackled by the true nature of their personae.

For every character in every work of fiction, past, present or future, hails from the Depository, a realm suspended above the collective imaginations of all who write creatively; a place from where characters can be summoned as required, and to which they are returned when no longer needed; a vast complex inhabited by the likes of Hard-Bitten Felons, Gutsy Heroines, Sensitive Policemen, Pathetic Waifs, Chivalrous Heroes, Distressed Damsels, Sinister Villains, Corrupt Officials and, an authorial favourite, Noxious Critics.

And, of course, by Romantic Leads. Thousands of them, one of whom - RL 81479 - was about to be called to action; having been briefed as to the plot two hours previously by his character overseer, he was now sitting in an invocation booth, awaiting his introduction into the story. It sounded like routine stuff; handsome stranger sails into town, meets young local nubile girl, the two fall in love; the townspeople object, girl leaves town in distress, girl is kidnapped by swarthy libidinous brigands; hero rescues girl single-handedly, the two marry with the blessing of the townsfolk, sail off into the sunset and live happily ever after. Nothing to it. In front of him, a timer was counting down the E.T.I. - estimated time of invocation - which currently stood at a little under ten minutes.

RL 81479 was suddenly overwhelmed by the need to urinate; he leaned out of the booth, and saw another character strolling by. "Yo!" he called, and Axe Wielding Psychopath 277 turned to look at him.

"Could you stand in for me for a minute, please?" asked RL 81479, "I'm desperate for a tinkle." Some of the genteel courtesy of his many roles had inevitably rubbed off; this euphemism came naturally to him.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" asked AP 277. There were many thousand fewer Axe-Wielding Psychopaths than there were Romantic Leads, but their number was increasing with their growing popularity as literary figures. "Aren't you about to do a story?"

"I've got ten minutes left," replied RL 81479. "Go on, I'm absolutely bursting," he pleaded, "you can't have me start with wet trousers."

"Well, okay then," replied AP 277 after a pause, "but just this once." In the Depository, such characters as Axe-Wielding Psychopaths and Tramp Sacrificing Satanists were perfectly placid and agreeable, though their conversation would grow more lively with each portrayal they affected; it was only when they were called upon to act their roles that their more unsavoury tendencies surfaced and they started to chop people up. RL 81479 leapt out and scampered down the passage towards the lavatories as AP 277 entered the booth and sat down. E.T.I. 9:12, said the counter.

It was half past seven, and Gilbert Boswell was stuck for words. He had hoped to have drafted the entire first chapter of his new work, *Passion in Pangsirtung*, by eight o'clock, but had spent so much time describing the Thai fishing town - he ignored the geographical inconvenience of Pangsirtung's being on Baffin Island, Canada - that he had left himself little time in which to introduce his hero, Stefano di Tagliatelli. This name was a complete oversight on Boswell's part; having heard the name and liked it, he had not bothered to investigate its origin. Gilbert Boswell had yet to be published.

Sighing and leaning back, he decided to restructure the first chapter. Instead of having some Happy Thai Fishermen scuttle excitedly round the harbour in anticipation of the launch from the big ship, he would have the motor-boat arrive and disgorge the handsome dashing Latin surveyor, and the four other, less important surveyors, immediately. Di Tagliatelli would be entering the story a little earlier than planned, and a touch of scene-setting would be going astray, but never mind.

Leaning over the word processor, Boswell began to type. The launch arrived; some Happy Thai Fishermen greeted it; di Tagliatelli's companions disembarked;

finally, the suave bronzed surveyor himself stepped onto the rickety wooden pier. Boswell was seized by an inexplicable impulse to change di Tagliatelli's first comment; instead of the intended "Hmm, what beautiful scenery," he typed: "What am I doing here?" A good ambiguous touch, some initial misgivings, thought Boswell, then was gripped by another urge. "I could have sworn Pangsirtung was in Canada," he typed.

The creation of a story goes something like this: when an idea for a work of fiction is conceived, one of the many character overseers selects from the Depository those who will enact the plot, which is then described to the chosen characters. As the author envisages a setting, a milieu conforming to this conceptualisation is created in the collective imagination, whether or not it is geographically correct - it is the writer's vision which is taken as a starting point, and this need not necessarily be based in fact. The stronger the visualisation, the more detailed and credible will be the setting created, while a badly thought-out or hastily introduced locale would be poorly defined, hazy and lacking in detail.

Immediately prior to their introduction into the plot, the characters wait in invocation booths, from which they are transported to the scene in the collective imagination as soon as their roles commence; while they are not in use - that is, when the author is describing some other scene - the characters are temporarily released from their parts. When the persona leaves the story, be it by death, disappearance, or simply taking no further part in the action, the character - fully intact and healthy, regardless of the manner in which the narrative was departed - is transported back to the Depository. Of course, if the wrong character is in the booth at the time of invocation, it is this character who takes the role, and who must struggle to meet the story's requirements; it was due to such a circumstance that Axe-Wielding Psychopath 277 found himself portraying, or attempting to portray, a romantic hero with a silly name in a mislocated pot-boiler, without the aid of any idea of what he was meant to be doing, but with a rising eagerness to take an axe to everyone within sight; and it was with no small horror that Romantic Lead 81479 returned to the invocation booth, only to find it unoccupied, and the "Character Invoked" logo flashing.

Stefano di Tagliatelli was standing on the rickety wooden pier, surrounded

by an excited throng of Happy Thai Fishermen, "I wish these bloody peasants would just unload our stuff," he said, deliberately moderating his words until he could find out what was going on. Turning to one of his companion surveyors, he added, "I feel like taking an axe to the whole flaming lot of them."

Gilbert Boswell was loving this; such conversation could continue for as long as it wanted.

"Go easy, can't you," replied the surveyor, Trusty Sidekick 912381, "they're just natives. It's not every day something like this happens."

"The 'just natives'," said di Tagliatelli, "are getting up my nose."

"I wonder what the women are like?" wondered TS 912381 pointedly.

Ah, thought Boswell, good cue, and began to describe the heroine. Around the harbour, the scenery suddenly lost all its colour, became monochromatic. "Hey!" shouted one of the Happy Thai Fishermen, Indigenous Asian 3134, to di Tagliatelli. "What's going on? You're meant to be a romantic gentleman, civilized and caring and charming..."

"Yes, not a sour-faced git," agreed TS 912381, "what's wrong with you?"

"I stood in for a guy when he went to take a leak," answered AP 277, "I guess the character must have been invoked early."

"That's right," said another surveyor, "I was called in about eight minutes ahead of time."

There were murmurs and nods of agreement from his companions, and from one or two of the peasants.

"So, what are you?" asked TS 912381.

"I'm an Axe-Wielding Psychopath," replied AP 277 candidly. "Can you give me some idea of the plot? I don't know what's happening here." As he spoke, however, colour began to seep back into the scenery.

"Next time," said TS 912381, "we're on again. Just try not to slice anyone up."

Romantic Lead 81479 was in his overseer's office, seated before the large desk. The chair behind the desk was empty, however, as the overseer was striding around furiously. "Are you aware," she roared, "that your place in the story was taken by an Axe-Wielding Psychopath?" RL 81479 had not known this; he remained silent. "Can you imagine what's going to happen?" she continued, "an undistinguished romance is going to become a bloodbath!"

Plaintively, RL 81479 said "I was only gone a couple of minutes..."

"That doesn't matter!" interrupted the overseer. "You were put in the booth with half an hour to wait in order to guard against early invocation... I told you that the author was hopelessly unpredictable but you, the most important character, had to go to the john!" She paused, then continued sedately, "Your punishment has been decided upon, and reflects the gravity of your misdemeanour... you are to be confined to secondary leads in hack Mediterranean holiday romances for twenty characterisations."

RL 81479 leant forward, held his head in his hands, and sighed heavily; this was far worse than he had expected. "Do you have

anything to say?" asked the overseer; RL 81479 did not answer.

Henry Rroyd reviews "Passion in Pangnirtung" by Gilbert Boswell

This looked, sounded and felt like a truly ordinary pot-boiler, an impression reinforced by the fact that, while Pangnirtung is in Canada, the novel is set in Thailand; and, unbelievably, by the hero's being named after a type of pasta. Within the text, all possible manner of simplistic mechanics and contrived devices are displayed ostentatiously, as if they are something of which the author is proud; the prose is turgid beyond my power to describe; and the plot, as I laughingly describe it, is predictable in the extreme, strained and obvious with no hope of salvation and not worth describing here; but there is one saving grace, one redeeming feature which raises *Passion in Pangnirtung* above others of its kind, and which compensates sufficiently for its copious faults to make it ultimately readable.

I refer to the characterisation of the lead, Stefano di Tagliatelli. Not for Boswell is this hero simply a dashing, Latin Casanova; the reader always senses that there exists something darker suppressed beneath the protagonist's tranquil, well-mannered exterior. Throughout the novel there is a poignant ambiguity about his words and actions, which mean little in themselves, but which have a cumulative effect which builds until some form of release is necessary, lest di Tagliatelli be thought to be simply affecting this attitude or, worse still, this is sheer clumsiness of structure, orchestration without finale, on the author's part. But release is thankfully found when di Tagliatelli tracks down the bandits who have kidnapped his love and, armed with a large axe, sets about them in a frenzy of violence; this is described with such unsettling vividness and, dare I say, authenticity, that the reader this reader, in any case - is left in a kind of shocked, exhilarated awe. The catharsis of this sequence is immense, and it goes also to emphasise the suggestions that, despite their apparent compatability, the simple, gentle Thai peasant girl is entirely mismatched with the charming, attractive but latently explosive and provenly homicidal surveyor; that di Tagliatelli is pardoned his confessedly horrific crime, and that the couple sail off to start a new life together in his native Italy, mean not that the ending is a happy one, but that it is only superficially so. The personality with which the hero is imbued, and the actions which confirm this so adeptly, lace the entire work - in particular, the final scenes - with a sinister equivocacy; it is this which makes *Passion in Pangnirtung* a far more satisfying read than scores of otherwise similar works, and this is in the end due to Boswell's creation of a character who is wholly credible in his flaws, his desires... in his *humanity*.

"Well, well, well," said the Overseer Supreme, having read Rroyd's review of *Passion in Pangnirtung* to Romantic Lead 81479 and Axe-Wielding Psychopath 277, "we've created a right little

rumpus, haven't we now?" The characters were seated before the desk in the Overseer Supreme's office, while she herself was standing behind them; to RL 81479, this situation was horribly familiar. "However," the Overseer Superior continued, "in view of the effect that your actions have had - that was only one of many favourable reviews in which the praise was based solely around the di Tagliatelli character - it has been decided that RL 81479 is to be granted a reprieve, and that his punishment shall therefore extend only to the two novels in which he has already taken part. It has been further decided to introduce, on an experimental basis, a limited scheme of unexpected characterisation, wherein such miscastings as yours, AP 277, will be made deliberately without the characters' knowledge, resulting in more interesting fiction, and hence more interest in fiction." This was a favourite catchphrase of the Overseer Supreme's. "You may leave," she said, and they did, unwitting progenitors of a new era.

So this, then, is where characters come from, how they are defined, where their personalities originate; and this explains why authors are prone to sudden changes of mind, why they are given to instinctive urges to alter what works satisfactorily, in favour of something that may be better, but may equally be worse. However, by determining the characters' behaviour, it is ultimately the writer who shapes the work; or is it? The overseers saw to it that characterisation should be changed, and it is within their power to misinform the characters, to alter their actions so that they differ from the writers' intentions; to transform the plots in this way, and so to bring about such fundamental changes that fiction will, in effect, shape itself.

And who can say that they have not already done so?

Peter Reveley is 24, was born in Hertfordshire but has resided in Manchester for over 6 years. Stories have previously been accepted by *The Gate, Works, Exuberance* and *Augurles*, but all are awaiting publication. He has had a couple of basic programs published in *Games Computing* and *Personal Computing Today*. He shares a house with two people, the again obligatory two cats and works in an office. Influences include Cyberpunk, Cosgrove Hall, Peter Greenaway, Terry Gilliam, the Cocteau Twins, The Jesus and Mary Chain, Colin Weston, Factory, Oscar Wilde, Sooty and Tom and Jerry.



"IOANI!"

The murky waters froth and bubble about my face, filling my mouth, ears, eyes. Sweet Jesu, so cold, so deathcold, help me, help me, I am drowning! I claw upwards, fighting the strong arms pushing me down, scrabbling to keep a hold on him, he, my lover, my betrayer, my - murderer.

White waterlilies are rising to the surface of the Lake. Ninufars.

"loan, loan, d - don't do this - "

But my sodden clothes, leadheavy, are dragging me down, down beneath the grey Lake, down to oblivion. Coughing, retching up the filthy water, spewing it out, shuddering out the rank mudfilth chilling my throat, my lungs, hearing my voice bubbling faint as the waters close over my head, as he forces me down again.

"loan - save me, save me, I love you - "

The fine dark cloak he has placed about my shoulders, fixing it with a silver brooch, is waterlogged already. Kick against its wet shroudfolds, kick loose, kick free -

Head breaks surface again, gasp in air, the damp night air, air that burns, the water bubbling in my aching throat.

White ninufar lilies, curled petals like the delicate hands of drowned girls.

Fight! Fight him! Live, live, live, I want to live, grab the side of the boat, tip him in too... Ah, why am I so weak, so weak, why are my grasping fingers so cold and numb, why, why...?

"Help me! Help!" Floundering, screaming into the empty night, but only owls and herons will hear me, he planned this so well and I never doubted him, not till the instant he pushed me over the side -

White ninufars open their frail petal-fingers to the moon.

"Damn you. Go under."

That inexorable hand, with all the iron strength of his twenty years, forcing me down, his amberstone signet ring caught in my hair, my tawny hair that he once loved to stroke, pressing my face under the water, holding it there, dear God, I am dying dying dying...

"lo...an..."

The waters close over my head. All sounds muffled but for the roar of waters. I cannot breathe. Water-roar. Bubbles rising. I cannot breathe. Bubbles, frothing bubbles. Murk. I cannot see. The clouded mud from the lakefloor is engulfing me, it is black, murkblack and it tastes of death.

My death. My eyes are open but I cannot see, I am drifting down, down, down and there is no -

Drifting, I am drifting in the chill waters like a feathered frond of lakeweed, only anchored to sensation by the slight ebb and flow of movement high above on the surface...

Liquid silver spills across the black mirror. A sudden shaft pierces the mud-stirred darkness in which I drift to and fro, pierces me through, pierces the dull sediment of my numbed consciousness.

Awake. I am awake, I see, I hear, I...

Feel.

Coldsilver light goes scintillating through every vein, every pore, animating,

NINUFAR'S Kiss

By Sarah Ash

revivifying...

Limbs glimmer eerily in the moonsilvered waters, fingers long and thin, so translucent [the light seems to radiate from them]

Strands of hair eddying in the sluggish current, swirling about this shimmering translucence, this incorporeal sentence, rising upwards, slowly upwards, drawn to the light...

I. Me. But who am I, what am I, why am I drifting below the waters, how long I have I been aimlessly drifting here?

The moonglimmer on the surface dazzles. Such cold, chaste purity. Such whitechill. I am so frail I rise effortlessly, borne on a froth of bubbles to shatter the black mirrorglass of the Lake's meniscus.

Moon. White moon. Whitelight sears my lids with coldsilver.

Let me drown again, let me drift back down, down to the numbcold mud, the oblivion beneath the Lake's sediment, let me not remember, let me forget, forget, forget...

Voices. Shouting. Fuzzy, at first, faint, as though heard through chokefog, then clearer.

"Thekla! The - kla!"

"Over this way! In the rushes!"

Torchlight, bobbing flares of flame over on the far shore amongst the reeds. And a name. My name. I think it is my name. Men moving on the bank, running, calling to each other. So far, far away, so distant -

"The - kla!"

"I'm here! Here!"

Moving through the water towards them, easily now, no heavy folds to weigh me down, drifting like mist across the still surface...

"Here I am!"

Why don't they hear me? I am crying out to them as loud as I can, I have almost reached the bank, close enough to recognise voices, faces...

And he is there, helping them, my loan, tall loan, his face scarred with grief. What are they pulling in through the rushes, using sticks, rakes, ropes, what is it that lies so heavily in the water?

"Dear God..." loan turns away, covering his face with his hands, shoulders heaving. The others are silent now, staring down at the waterlogged bundle of clothing, the weed-tarnished hair, once fair, tawnyfair like mine...

loan speaks at last.

"I - I had no idea the tidings would affect her so badly. At first she wept. But then she became calm. 'I wish you both joy, loan,' she said. 'I always knew it was not to be.' I never imagined it would drive her to - to this -" He breaks down again, sobbing.

"loan, loan, don't weep, I'm here!"

Why does he not hear my voice? Why do none of them hear me? Why do they shake their heads? Whose is the bloated body from which they all avert their eyes, crossing themselves as they turn away?

"A suicide. Crazed for love."

Suicide? Who is dead?

"loan! Wait, love, wait, don't go, don't walk away from me!"

They are bringing a cart down the bank, Old Diko the gravedigger in his mildewed robes spits on his stained palms, rubbing them together before he sets to dragging the body into the cart. And as he grabs hold of the watersodden clothes and tugs, it flops over and I see, I see, I see - myself. My body. Livid skin puffed almost beyond recognition, discoloured with decay, mouth gaping slack, staring green eyes dulled to the mouldy crust of verdigris. My body. Putrefying. Loathsome. Lifeless. Dumped in Diko's filthy cart like so much ordure. My body.

Suicide. Crazed for love.

And loan, walking away from it alone into the night, loan, my lover...

Ai, let me forget, forget...

It was not suicide. You killed me, loan. You pushed me into the Lake and when I screamed for mercy, you held me under, you used your strength to force my head beneath the chill water until I drowned, I, your lover, your mistress, bearer of your unborn child.

And now you walk away a free man whilst they hurriedly bury my corpse in unconsecrated ground. Without ceremony. Without the blessing of the priest. Without flowers or headstone.

Without hope of salvation.

I fling back my head and a cry, a cry of utter desolation comes tearing from deep within me, wailing on and on across the barren waters.

'Ai, loan, loan, aiiiiiiiiii...'

Old Diko looks up from his task. He shivers, his gap-toothed mouth works a little, muttering prayers under his breath. Did he hear me? Or did he just feel a chill gust of wind wailing through the reeds?

What am I? Why am I not extinguished,

why do I still see, hear, feel? What is this translucent form, so like to my mortal body which now lies dripping waterweed in the gravedigger's cart? I am... undead...

The starry sky blurs, the Lake grows dim. The moonlight is fading.

So weak now, so faint... I am sinking beneath the waters, drowning, drowning again... No pain this time, no burn of air-starved lungs, yet I am drawn slowly downwards as inexorably as the moonlight drew me to the surface...

"Sssister..."

Who is calling me?

Slivers of whiteness writhe in the murky waters: slender fingers wreath before my face, hollow eyes, stare into mine, then drift past.

"Sssister...it is time to sleep..."

Who are you, you water-wraiths with your trailing hair, your staring, hungry eyes...

"It is moonset... you must sleep..."

Why must I sleep? WHY?

"You are one of us now... you are one of the Ninufarim..."

Ninufar. Moonwraith, destined to haunt the waters where the pale ninufars flower... When the moon rises, I rise from the world of shadows to taint the night. When the moon sets, I must sink back to muddy oblivion, to fitful sleep wracked by shards of nightmare until the next moonrise.

I am no longer alone. There are others. They call me sister. Their wildsnarled hair is festooned with slimy weed, their sunken eyes glint in the moonlight, their long nails are talon-sharp. They are predators. They are hungry. But they do not feed. And they will not tell me what it is they hunger for.

Not yet.

Weak... so very weak... Drift with the current, float over the softly sussurating reeds... I am fading, fading slowly away, soon I shall dissolve into the mist...

Lanterns go bobbing along the shore, wild music skirls across the moonlit waters, music to scorch the blood to passionheat, wedding music.

Who is the bridegroom, who the bride? Who is the red-lipped girl with dog roses and eglantine in her hair?

"Go see," hiss my sisters, "while the moon is high, go see..."

I do not want to go. I do not want to go. The mist swirls over the Lake, envelops me, bears me upwards, drifts across the sleeping village.

The casement of the bridal chamber is open wide.

I do not want to go in.

Mist seeps in through the casement. I am inside the chamber. Candles wispily guttering reveal clothes discarded, wedding finery torn off in the throes of passion, bridal garlands thrown down, crushed underfoot...

And in the bed, the lovers clinging together, naked flesh pressed hard into shuddering naked flesh, the man with hair dark as blackthorn sloes, dark as my faithless loan's hair -

Hai, I do not want to look, do not make me look. I am screaming aloud his name.

"loannnnnn..."

Mist carries me away, my voice no more than a chill breath of marshbreeze.

But she feels it. She shivers, sitting up in bed, clutching the embroidered covers to her bare breasts, her flesh all goose-pimpled.

"loan - did you not hear something?"

He listens awhile, shakes his head.

"loannnnnn...!"

"There!"

"Nothing. A marsh bird, an owl..."

"I'm cold. Close the shutters, loan. Please."

Grumbling he lumbers out of the warm bed.

"Murderer!"

The shutters slam shut and I am on the outside, a fast-dissolving mist of inconsolable tears, wafting far, far away...

My sisters cluster around me, bearing me to the reedy beds of the Lake, whispering in soft-spider voices of revenge.

"There is a way," they tell me, hungrily licking shrivelled lips.

No. Let me be, let me rot as my earthly body rots in its unhallowed grave, let me melt into the morning mist...

"A soul for a soul. Only another's soul will set you free..."

I can see their purpose now. A little child, toddling too close to the edge, a young man swimming far from the shore, a village girl washing her hair, entice them, take them, drown them - be free. A soul for a soul.

No. I will not do it.

Let me dissolve into the Lake bed, let me evaporate into the mist, let me be nothing...

Let me alone.

I have dwindled to a shadow... but each evening the moon's cold light floods my shadowform with silver, sends life - or unlife? - spinning through my skeletal leaf-veins. And each evening, I must rise with the moon, whether I will or no, and each evening I must drift back to the leafmould sediment that clogs the Lake bottom and dream drear, dead dreams until the moon rises again. This has no ending. This is forever. This is my eternity, an eternity of shadowlife, endless winters trapped beneath the thick crusted ice, endless summers drifting between my bed of lakesludge and the starbright surface where memories quicken, memories of sun... of warmth... of love.

Years must have passed, years without number... The moon wanes, the moon waxes full...

There is a man, a young man sitting on the shore. Overhead the harvest moon, a beaten disc of gilded silver, hangs over the village. They have brought the harvest home, they are chanting the harvest songs and the night is bright with bonfires. But he has left the dancing, he is solitary, sad, trailing his hand in the waters...

A soul for a soul...

Hai, he is beautiful, a look of my faithless loan about him, sloe-dark hair, sloe-dark eyes...

And if it were true, what my sisters told me... a soul for a soul? They have become

foul, weed-slimes, ill-kempt with the years. Am I as hideous as them, if I reveal my silvered shadowform to him, will he shrink away from me in revulsion?

I part the reeds.

His eyes. Widened. Mouth gaping.

"Wh - what are you?" His voice, a whisper. But deep, vibrant with the life pulsing within him. "What do you want?"

"You."

I raise one hand, beckoning. My hair drips rivulets of silver drops over my naked body, I am more light than substance.

And he is mesmerised. He is slowly reaching out towards me - so easy to catch hold of him, drag him into the deeps, hold him under until that vibrant life force gurgles out of him. So easy...

"Me...? You want... me?"

"Yessss..."

But it is not his death I want, not yet, I want some of that vital force pulsing within him, some of that warmth I can feel even a hand's distance from him, as fingertips reach to touch my fingertips...

Desire makes me dizzy. His touch. It gives me strength, strength to slide out of the waters, into his arms. And oh, the warmth of him, the heat of his blood... I want it, I must have it all for myself. I pull his face towards mine, I kiss him, my petal-pale lips, frail as moonshine, gaining substance, gaining life as his mouth opens beneath mine.

More, I want more than his kisses. His fumbling hands give substance to my shadowform, white shoulders, breasts, belly, thighs...

"Beautiful..." He is tearing off his breeches. "So beautiful..."

Poor fool. He is staring mazedly into my eyes, he no longer knows or cares what he is doing.

He is in my power.

Even as he shudders in my arms on the mud-damp bank, even as the hot seed comes spurning out of him into me, I see the ecstasy dulling in his glazing eyes and I feel his strength leeching into me, I am draining him, draining him dry, sucking him dry as an empty fruit-skin...

And the laughter comes bubbling up, from deep within me, I am laughing drunkenly aloud, head flung back... so easy and I never knew, so easy! The elixir of life, here, so close, so deliciously, wantonly close at hand. No need to take a soul for a soul.

He has rolled off me and is lying on the bank, moaning faintly. His eyes have rolled up in his head, his sweat-cold skin is as pallid as the setting moon, judders shake his body.

"Was I too much for you, my fine hero?" I straddle his body, I thrash his face with my wet hair. I am still laughing, I cannot stop.

"God protect me..." His voice so faint now. His hand rises, fluttering towards me

The amberstone ring on his ring finger.

"Your ring. Your ring. Where did you get it? Where? Where?" I hiss into his face. His sloe-black eyes scarce see me.

"Help me..."

"Your ring!"

"My... father's ring..."
 "Your father. Your father! Who is your father?"
 "loannnnnn..."

I cannot stop laughing. I am laughing until the tears stream like lakewater down my face. The tears will not stop. His fingers flutter once more, brushing my cheek, the wetness of the tears that keep flowing.

"Why... are you weeping...?"
 "Tell loan your father my name. Just that."

"Your... name?"
 "Thekla." His eyes are glazing over. I shake him. He must hear. He must remember. "Thekla. Thekla -"

"Hoi there, Arkadi! Your mother's fretting! You're late for supper!"

Voices, cheerful, ribald voices. Shouting, hot with wine and firelight. I slide into the water, into the reed beds. I wait.

"He's got a girl, loan. Remember - you used to do your courting by the Lake?"

"What, my Arkadi with a girl? He's too shy!"

"Ah, but when the blood burns -"
 The laughter, the jesting stops. Suddenly. I part the reedstrands, I peer through.

"Arkadi..." loan's voice, all banter, all vigour hushed. He is there, kneeling over his son and - he is old. loan is an old, grey-haired man, his limbs stiffly rheumatic, bending creakily to raise the boy's head.

"Arkadi, Arkadi, what has happened to you?" Such grieving in his voice now, such a weight of love. "Were you set upon? Was it thieves?"

"The - kla. . ."

"What!"

His emotion so shocked, so vivid I can almost taste it.

"There are many girls called Thekla," says loan's companion uneasily.

"Arkadi, Arkadi!" loan is frantically calling his son, slapping his pale face. No response. Arkadi breathed out the last of his life on the syllables of my name.

I had not thought to be revenged in this manner. The sin was not the boy's, it was the father's. . . and he could have been my son. . .

White waterlilies float on the surface of the Lake.

loan lays the body down on the damp grass. He staggers forwards, drops to his knees at the water's edge. And he calls. At last he calls me. Too late.

His voice is old, broken with age.

"Thekla! Thekla! Why Arkadi? My only child!"

So close I could touch him through the reedcurtain.

White ninufar lilies, curled petals like the delicate hands of drowned girls.

"Thekla! Take me instead! Only give me back my son!"

My tears have dried. I do not think I shall ever weep again over any man.

"Take me, Thekla! End this miserable life!"

No.

I will not take you, loan, I will not give you the swift, easy end to your suffering that you crave. The moon is setting and my

sisters are calling me.

White ninufars close their frail petalfingers to the moon.

"The - kla!"

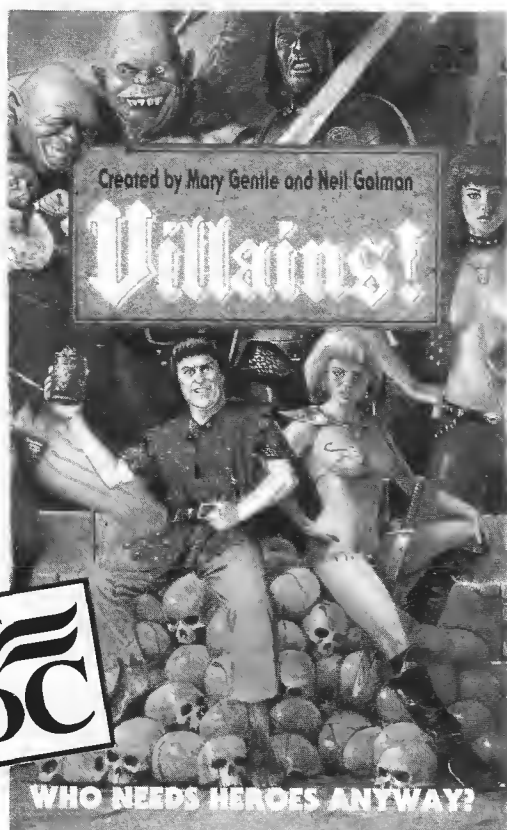
Live long, old man. Live long and remember Thekla. Grow senile, grow wrinkled, mumble by your fireside. No-one will believe you. The ninufars will bloom on the grey waters of the Lake and the ninufarim will rise from the waters with the moonrise. We will be hungry.

And we will feed.

Sarah Ash trained as a musician and - when not looking after her husband and two sons or writing - teaches music. "NINUFAR'S KISS" was the genesis of her recently completed fantasy novel "Scent Of Lilies" (another is doing the rounds) which was inspired by the legends and folk music of Bulgaria.



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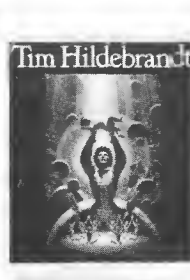
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RING

Break in the

By John Brunner

The approach alarm could scarcely have sounded at a less welcome moment. There was little enough to do on Tethys and seldom anybody new to do it with. Rarest of all was a guest like Felicia Chowdhury, and she was only scheduled to spend another forty-eight hours at London before joining Hilary Furstenkamp at New York. But on hearing the beep she forgot all else, especially me.

Jumping off the bed, she ran to the instrument panel. I derived what consolation I could from watching her graceful movements. Feeling them, I concluded, had been a lot more fun...

"It's from clear out of the plane of the ecliptic!" she announced in high excitement, dropping into the operator's chair and tapping hasty codes into the board. "Something's a bit anomalous about the orbit, too. Come and look!"

"You just tell me," I said - a bit grumpily, I admit.

"But it looks as though it's extrasolar!" she insisted. "None of the ordinary local clutter from the rings. Deep space stuff!"

It was Felicia's first tour off Earth, and like all such it was a literal tour; she was due to visit every inhabited dome on Tethys before heading for home and a compulsory year's sabbatical prior to deciding whether she really wanted to opt for the solitude of a career Out Deep. I suspected she did, at least so far. She didn't yet appreciate how much human contact could come to mean at an isolated spot like this. To her, as an aspiring cosmozoologist, the chance of being the first to analyse a chunk of matter that had drifted into the solar system after billions of years of wandering, in search of clues to the origin of life, was infinitely more attractive than what she'd just been doing, no doubt mainly out of courtesy.

"Estimated point of impact," I heard her say to the machines, and obligingly they presented the co-ordinates.

"Hmm! Looks like about halfway between here and Cairo," she announced.

"Then I hope it doesn't knock down Leary's Sign."

"What?"

"Didn't Marco tell you about that?" She'd spent two weeks with Marco Redfeather at Chicago before moving to London. "The signpost Lotus Leary put up while she and Ivan Katsamura were waiting for launch. Said it'd be something

to remember them by if they didn't come back."

Suddenly serious, she nodded. "And they didn't, did they?"

Correct. Their attempt to slingshot around Saturn using its tenuous upper atmosphere to divert them back to their starting-point had failed - why, no one had ever figured out. But there seemed little point in answering her question when she knew the facts already. Besides, at that moment the impact detector announced the object's landfall. A heartbeat later everything within the dome not fastened down rattled gently.

"Big!" Felicia reported. "Several tons, at least. Oh, Olaf, I have to get out there and take samples!" She jumped up, ready to don a spacesuit without more ado.

"You may not be able to reach it," I pointed out more sourly than I'd intended. "That much mass can bury itself pretty deep in a crust like ours. Why not have a look at the site beforehand?"

"How?"

"We have plenty of remote viewers wanderin' around. The automatics have probably already rerouted the nearest."

And, leaving her to it, I leaned back and shut my eyes. Only to be aroused by a faint cry.

"Olaf, it wasn't a meteorite. It was a ship. And it's crashed."

I sat bolt upright on the instant. A ship? But a ship would have come in signalling on all bands! Especially one on a disaster course!

"It looks pretty badly damaged," she was saying. "The after part of the hull is torn wide open, and there's smoke rising from the upperworks -"

"Smoke?"

"Yes, two separate plumes. You can see them plainly. The viewer must be only a few hundred metres from -"

"Felicia," I said from a throat that was suddenly as dry as space itself, "there is no atmosphere worth mentioning on Tethys. And smoke does not rise in a vacuum. It can be spurted upward, but it doesn't rise."

There was a brief and fearful silence. Then she said in a quavering tone, "If it isn't smoke, what is it?"

By now I was looking over her shoulder. And she was right. A ship of some sort had crashed, at the base of the irregular triple peak someone had unkindly nicknamed Olaf's Molars, and grey wisps were drifting up from it,

exactly like smoke in atmosphere. Impossible!

"Something's coming out," she whispered. I reached past her to zoom the camera in. It was almost ideally located, practically at the foot of Leary's Sign with its stencilled arms pointing to London and Chicago and the other domes. I focused on the left of the ship. In deep shadow something was stirring. No: someone. Another adjustment and I could see clearly. Someone in a spacesuit, moving clumsily, as though exhausted or seriously hurt.

I sounded an all-stations alert.

Hilary's screen lit first, although he was rubbing sleep from his eyes. The first thing to meet his gaze was my temporary companion, and a purr entered his voice.

"You must be Felicia! Hello! Now I really am looking forward to your visit!"

"Uh - hello!" she responded, unable to stop herself from preening, but prevented from continuing as Hans Martinez logged on from Madrid. Marco followed a moment later. Fatima Prasad was last, as was to be expected; she had a chip on her shoulder. Hilary claimed it was because Cairo Dome hadn't been named Ky-ro after the capital of Egypt, but Kay-ro for the city in Illinois. I preferred not to venture an opinion.

"Do you have the crashed ship in view?" I demanded. All save Fatima nodded yes, and she started and quickly made connection. I returned my attention to my main screen.

"Hey!" Marco exclaimed. "That's one of the old Mark 29 suits, isn't it? I haven't seen one in ages! Remember those awful revolving grippers that never worked as well as a proper hand? Except for tightening nuts and bolts!"

The suit, which was blue, had emerged into full light by now - such as that is on Tethys - and the viewer revealed it in minute detail.

A knot of cold developed at the base of my sternum. I wondered whether, when I next tried to speak, I would have a usable voice.

"The helmet's fully blanked," Fatima put in, as though determined to compensate for her slow initial response. "That's funny! The way I remember the Mark 29, it wasn't supposed to go to blank this far from Sol."

It wasn't, though it could be made to, for instance by rocket glare or a fire. But that, to me, was not the most important point. I waited to see whether any of the others would spot it. When they didn't, I had to force into words what was making me purely and indescribably terrified. My teeth wanted to chatter. I forbade them.

"Don't you notice anything else odd about that suit?"

A puzzled silence. Lower lip caught between perfect incisors, Felicia glanced at me, wide-eyed.

"Oh, for pity's sake!" I exploded. "It's empty!"

"It can't be!" Hans retorted. "It's moving - someone must be in it!"

"Someone," I said, tightly, "who doesn't need air?"

"Olaf's right," Fatima muttered. "It's not distended. Not pressurised. It's - it's creased, like ordinary clothing at Earth-normal!"

The next pause was indescribably dreadful. And things became even worse when Felicia said at last, "But it is moving, isn't it? And what's more there's another coming after."

"And," I said, "those grey wisps that can't be smoke are starting to drift towards our viewer. See?"

So here we were, six human beings - normally we should have been seven, but Sofia Dome was on standby awaiting a new occupant - confronting what we had often thought of, discussed, and dismissed... though with wistful regret. Only those who have served Out Deep, on the far moons or in space, can understand what loneliness means. There have been times when even I, who think of myself as hardboiled, have caught myself wishing that an alien, be it never so monstrous, would come tapping at my airlock simply to vary the monotony. Now it was happening.

And no matter how loud we shouted it would take an hour or more for anybody else to learn the news, bar the chance of our signal being copied by a ship in transit. Another thing people like us understand is the slowness of light.

"SOS?" Hilary proposed. He'd digested the implications faster than the rest. If I'd met him back on Earth I'd have dismissed him as a conceited popinjay, but this wasn't the first time out here that he'd displayed more insight or intuition - than the average.

I concurred, saying, "We don't have enough data for anything else. But we must bring lots of ships here, fast."

"I'll send the signal," Marco said. "My dome's oriented to a near-optimal direction. Maximum power, Olaf?"

"Of course."

"Right. I'll be out of touch for a while."

His screen blanked.

"Why - ?" Felicia began. I cut her short.

"Maximum power means maximum. Every erg he doesn't need to stay alive is going to punch that signal through. It's apt to burst eardrums at the receiving end." After a brief hesitation: "I only ever heard that kind of signal once," I finished.

"When?" Her dark liquid eyes were searching my face.

"Oh, long ago. During my first tour." But that wasn't fair. I cleared my throat, unable to tear my own gaze from the screen. "When Lotus and Ivan came back around the limb and realised they were set to slam into the thickest zone of the ring. They should have been five degrees clear and climbing. Instead..."

"By then it was too late?"

"Oh, there was nothing anyone could do. We just had to watch, knowing that what we saw was already in the past."

"It must have been dreadful!"

"It wasn't the most fun I ever had. But nor is this." I tapped the screen. Moving awkwardly, but with increasing ease, as though whatever was controlling them was growing accustomed to its unfamiliar task, the suits were closing on the viewer. The first, arriving directly in front of it, halted as though waiting for its companion to catch up. In the background, the smoke that wasn't smoke curled groundward. Shortly it became invisible against the dusty, rocky surface of the moon. But I was sure it hadn't dissipated. It too was joining the - what?

- conference?

"Do you think - ?" Felicia's voice broke and she had to start again. "Do you think they're dangerous?"

"I hope not," I muttered. "But one thing is sure. They can do something we can't."

"Move a spacesuit with no air in it?"

"Exactly."

"But if they don't need air, why bother?"

I looked at her for a long moment. Eventually I said, "Thank you."

"What for?" She raised one hand to her mouth, as though trying to grasp the import of her words.

"Asking a sensible question. Move over, please."

She vacated the seat without demur. It was pleasantly warm from her bottom. Also the air was perfumed with her presence. I damned the ill luck that had spoiled my last two days in her company.

"Perhaps we ought to put some clothes on," I sighed. "I don't think we're facing a threat, but if you've ever been naked in a spacesuit you'll know why it's better to meet an emergency with something between you and it."

She darted to collect the garments we'd discarded an hour before. When she handed me mine, I was already interrogating the dome's data bank. And, even as I wriggled into my pants, up came the answer.

My memory hadn't played me false, old though I was. At the time Lotus and Ivan made their flight, the Mark 29 suit was still the standard issue. The Mark 30 had been in use nearer to Sol, but the first of



the improved models hadn't been delivered to Saturn for almost another year.

Back then, Felicia wasn't even born. I decided not to mention what I'd just discovered. Not to her. A student cosmozoologist she might be, but this was a far cry from the sort of thing her training had prepared her for, the analysis of meteorites in search of proto-organics. I fed it to my fellow residents privately, in printed form, while she was distracted by getting dressed.

Once again Hilary was first to catch on. His answer was terse and to the point: *Do we go say hello?*

Mine was shorter still: *We wait.*

It was as well, I found myself thinking, that this was happening by day. The odds were against, because there are two kinds of night on moons like Tethys. One is the ordinary sort, when the side you're on rotates away from Sol, and the other is when your primary eclipses it. Tethys's axis being tilted, and its orbit being inclined to both Saturn's equator and the plane of the rings - Oh, skip it. The details aren't important unless you live there. What counted was that our north pole was catching the sun and would be for several more hours, and all our domes were scattered around it, a legacy from the original purpose of the settlement. That being to assemble - indeed build, using local materials so far as possible - the ship Lotus and Ivan

were to fly. Tethys had a population of nearly a hundred then. Some of the now-surplus domes they'd occupied were visible near the crash-site.

Why send a crewed ship on such a mission? We'd set ten robot vessels adrift among the rings, and those had amassed vast amounts of information about their peculiar orbital mathematics, which had so puzzled observers back on Earth in the early days. We felt we understood what was going on pretty well: the braiding, the influence of the "shepherd moons" on which we'd stationed permanent monitors...

But for some people "pretty well" won't suffice. Lotus and Ivan were like that. And there were enough people who agreed with them to obtain the necessary authority and raise the necessary finance for a trip during which it was hoped that the as-yet unmatched ability of humans to spot connections between apparently random scraps of data might suggest a new line of inquiry for the computers.

Because, you see, there was still something wrong about those damned rings. Their lesser counterparts around the other gas-giants posed no such problems; they had been fully analysed and conformed precisely to natural laws.

Saturn's didn't.

We'd posted our robots on the shepherd moons. We had more floating free among the celestial debris. Every day, every hour, our computers received, stored and studied countless signals,

most of which were so like all the rest that they might as well have been simple echoes.

But now and then anomalies cropped up, at first maybe once or twice a year - ours, of course, not Saturn's. We'd been out this way for less than two orbits by the planet, and I was the only resident who had remained as much as one and a half. Occasionally, when I thought about it, I remembered I'd probably be forced to quit about the time I saw out my second local "year"...

What a way to spend one's life! Yet I couldn't rid myself of that nagging need to know why these of all the rings in the solar system refused to lie down in the neat and tidy patterns our computers ordained. What was worse, the anomalies were growing more frequent. The more data we accumulated, the less predictable the rings became. It was infuriating! If only - !

"Olaf! Are you all right?"

I roused to find Felicia tugging my sleeve.

"I was just thinking," I told her.

"But not watching!" She jabbed a finger at the screen. It was blank. I jerked back to full awareness.

"What happened?"

The answer came from Hilary.

"The suits - or whatever's driving them - knocked over the viewer. Maybe they don't like being spied on. Maybe they were just clumsy. At any rate they've tipped it lensdown, and now we're blind."

"Where's the next nearest viewer?" I snapped.

"One of mine is barely a klick away and closing rapidly. I'll keep it on the run, see how fast they can move if they try to catch up with it - but of course we can't use its pictures directly, not at high speed on rough ground. I'm programming for auto-corrected stable images. Should have something in a couple of minutes."

"And I'm mounting a viewer on jets," Fatima chimed in. "Programmed for ultra-low orbit, just enough to clear the peaks. We'll only get a few usable frames on each pass, but it'll be better than nothing."

That was neat. I chided myself for not having thought of the idea myself. I'd fallen into the same trap as Felicia when she referred to smoke, forgetting it can only rise thanks to convection in cooler gas surrounding it. Everyone knows in theory that a satellite can orbit an airless body at virtually zero altitude, but because it's not something one runs across in the real universe one tends to overlook the possibility. Mustering my warmest tone, I congratulated Fatima. Maybe I should have found an excuse to do it sooner; she positively beamed in response.

"Missed that!" Marco broke in. "Missed a lot, by the look of it! What happened to the picture from the crash site?"

"Welcome back," Hilary said. "You must have sunk a lot of power into that SOS."

"Much as I could," Marco said, and we



heard his teeth chatter. I glanced at his image. His breath was misting. before his mouth and frosting over his camera. He really had spent all the power he could spare. Good man! I felt a surge of affection towards these strangers - still strangers because we lived such separate lives, rarely visiting another dome because the familiar layout of one's own came to be an extension of personal identity - who had decided to settle here because they too were obsessed with the mystery that had held me on Tethys more than half my life.

Felicia had asked me about that a couple of days after her arrival from Chicago. To be candid, I was flattered, for she obviously hadn't plucked up courage to put the same question to Marco even though he was far closer to her in age - uncle or elder brother rather than father. But I'd been unable to find the proper words, perhaps because my motives have always been such an integral part of me that they won't distil into well-rounded phrases. The best explanation I'd managed to offer was that some people just can't bear to live in an untidy universe.

To which she had replied in terms I'd taken to be merely flippant: "We're untidy, aren't we? Living creatures are always dreadfully untidy! Sure, we organise the elements we actually use, but think of the mess we make simply by being us!"

At the time I'd thought she was making an oblique reference to the awful early years of last century, when we came

close to making Earth Herself unfit to live on. Thinking back now, I wasn't so sure. But I had no time to pursue the point, for Hans suddenly spoke up. We'd heard nothing from him in some while, I realised.

"I'm moving a viewer towards the ship. Right now the suits don't seem to be paying it any attention. Nor whatever it is that's keeping them company."

"Let's have a look!" I exclaimed.

The picture came up at once. The suits were in the distant background, ill-defined. Hans continued:

"I don't want to alarm them more than I can help. I risked one quick close-up and I think they reacted to the ranging laser. At any rate - Oh, this is incredible! I can't believe what's going on! Here we are confronted with the first ever evidence for alien life, maybe intelligent, certainly purposeful! I'm not the sort of person it ought to happen to! Why here, why now, why us?"

"Because we deserve it," I said softly, and I meant it. "We've been fool enough to squander years on wrestling with a mystery. This is our reward."

"You really think - ?" Fatima began, but Hans cut her short. Something in his viewer's field had caught his eye.

"Olaf, you verified the date the Mark 29 suit went out of service. Leary and Katsamura used it, didn't they?"

He hadn't been on Tethys at the start. He hadn't known them as Lotus and Ivan.

I said yes, acutely aware that Felicia had just put two and two together and

was wondering why I hadn't mentioned the matter to her.

"That's why I thought I'd better check out the ship," Hans went on. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

A collective gust of indrawn breath was his reply, as we all realised what he meant.

The ship wasn't a ship. The hull was collapsing into shapelessness. It had been lent a form and something had held that form in being. Now -

"Spectroanalysis!" Marco barked.

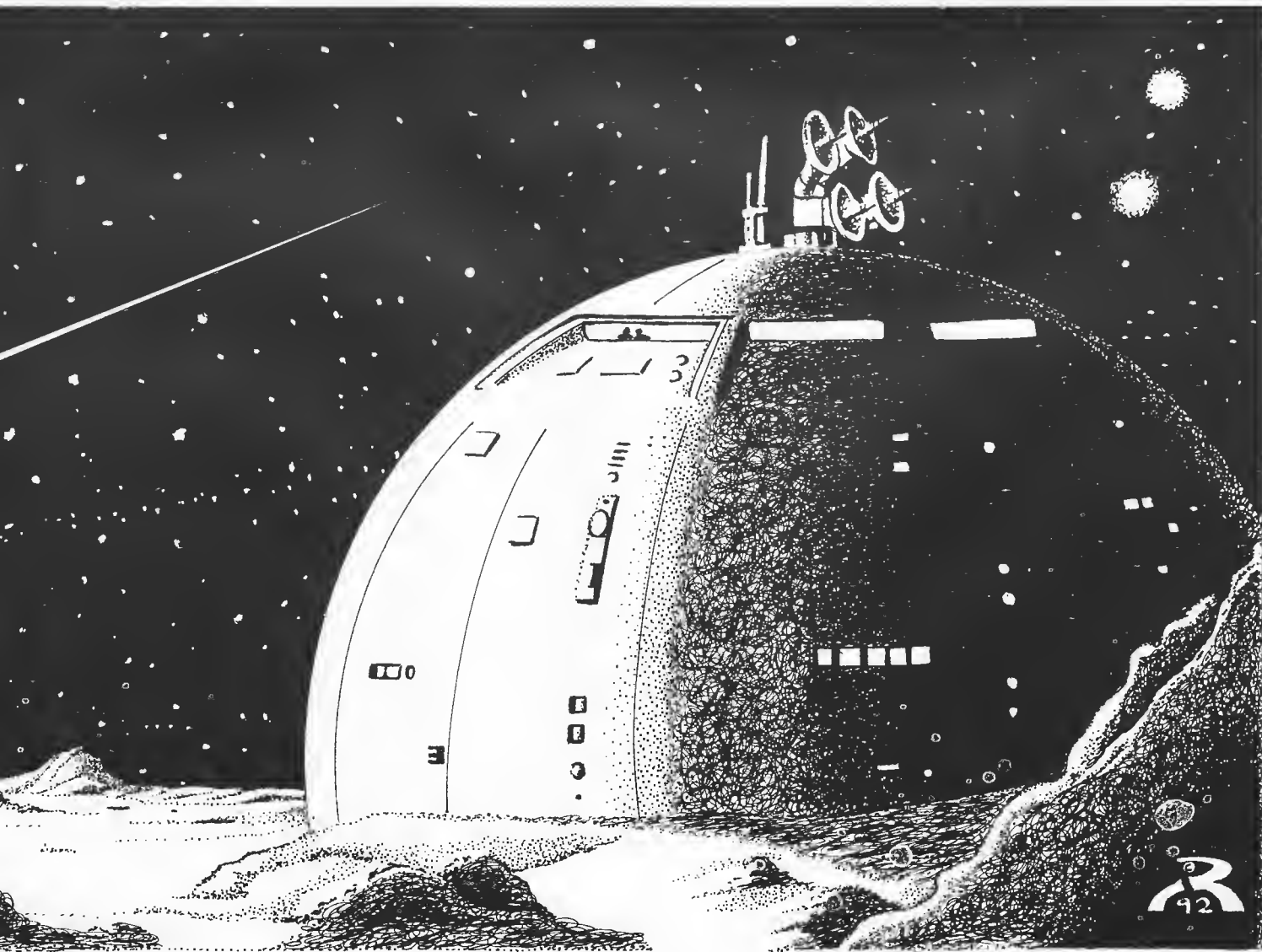
"Beat you," Hans said. "It's already running. I'll patch in the readings... There!"

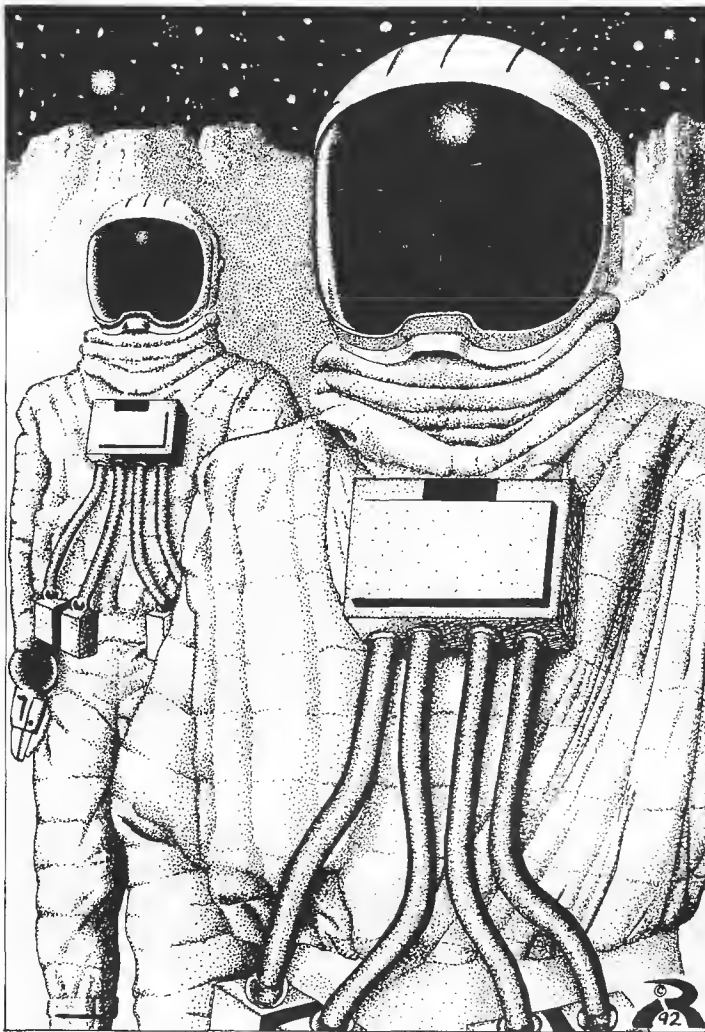
And off the bottom of the screen we read them. No sign of any of the materials we used for spaceships. No steel, no titanium, not even diamond. Just the common substances found in the rings: ice, methane, ammonia, traces of silicon and iron in crude unalloyed association...

"I think," Hans said, his throat audibly stiff, "it was frozen together in roughly the sort of shape we make our ships."

"Not Lotus and Ivan's!" I snapped. "Theirs wasn't in the least like that!"

"Of course not" - from Hilary, in the faintly patronising tone I'd often disliked. But this time I could forgive him. Once more he'd been quick on the uptake. "Theirs would have been smashed when it dived into the rings. But there was a resemblance, wasn't there? To the sort of vessels we used, for instance, to park monitors on the shepherd moons."





"And they faked it to mislead us," Fatima said. "Just as they're moving suits they can't possibly need. They -"

Marco interrupted. "Mislead? I'm not sure I like that word. Could it not be that they're trying to reassure us? Olaf, what do you think?"

I debated with myself. Finally I found words.

"I want to side with Marco. I'm afraid to disagree with Fatima. After all, what may seem like purposive behaviour may be nothing more than an elaborate reflex."

"But we are dealing with life, aren't we?" Felicia whispered, as though this instant she had realised that at the outset of her career she had stumbled into something her professors would have traded their eyeteeth for. She was kneeling at my side again, one elbow on the chair-arm. I rumbled her dark hair with my fingers - my old, gnarled, knob-knuckled fingers, scarred with radiation burns.

"Yes," I said. "We are definitely dealing with life. Nothing else could have created that imitation ship... Hilary! If memory serves your dome is the next one due to rotate into optimal alignment for a signal home."

He nodded in the screen, expression grave.

"You want me to report that we've met aliens?"

"I think so. Don't you?"

"Yes." Then: "Yes - yes - yes!"

"Okay," Hilary said, turning away from

his camera. He a d d e d overshoulder, "Damn!"

"What?" I blinked at him.

"Means I'm going to miss the first pictures from Fatima's low-orbit viewer, doesn't it? They're just about to come up, and mine hasn't produced much so far... Well, store 'em for me!" And his screen went blank.

Hilary's viewer, which he was keeping on the move as arranged, had as he said prompted no noticeable response, not even the sort that Hans ascribed to his ranging laser. Nor was it sending very informative pictures. However, the speeding orbiter provoked an astonishing reaction. On the

first pass we saw the suits surprisingly clearly, and not just the suits. Fatima had set the automatics to enhance three frames each time the camera shot by: from ahead, from above and when retreating. They came up sharp as any photo taken on a fine day on Earth.

"Smoke..." Felicia said in a faint voice. Yes, there were the grey wisps again, twined around the upper part of the suits, contrasting with the blue of the shoulders and blending with the silver-white of the blank helmets.

We waited impatiently for the next group of images. During the brief interval I checked out what Hans's viewer was showing, but all I saw was the last trace of the "ship" crumbling into dust. Then:

"But they haven't moved!" Felicia burst out. And it was true. The suits were utterly motionless. I wasn't so sure about the wisps. On the next pass:

"Still no sign of movement," Fatima murmured. "But I think the wisps have changed. I'll run a comparison."

"Can I see the pictures I've missed?" Hilary was back, teeth chattering as loudly as Marco's earlier. Clearly he was determined not to be outdone in his sacrifice of warmth and comfort to strength of signal.

"I'll put the whole lot up - there. Only the wisps are moving, and that sluggishly. I don't want to seem anthropocentric, but if they were human I'd say that pose was somehow... expectant?"

Another pass, another, and the suits remained rigid. The only changes were in the wisps. It became possible to detect a hint of form within that misty greyness. Between what I was coming to think of as snapshots our computers strove to analyse the developing pattern.

But, just as we had hoped might happen in the case of Lotus and Ivan, it was a human brain, not a machine, that leapt the intuitive gap and made sense of what we were watching. And it wasn't mine, much though I'd have liked it to be; it wasn't Hilary's, though I'd have expected it of him. It was Felicia's. She clamped her fingers on my arm so hard it hurt as she exclaimed, "But it's braiding! It's braiding like in the rings!"

Lightning rived the darkness of my mind. I erupted to my feet.

I know what's wrong with the rings! I know why we can't make sense of their orbits!

Only I didn't say it. I bit the words back just in time. Instead, I took advantage of my seniority, without premeditation and equally without shame.

I said, "I'm going out to meet them."

A horrified chorus assailed my ears. I disregarded it although the objections were perfectly sound: I should wait for reinforcements - but that would take weeks, at best; we lacked the right equipment - but what equipment was suited to this kind of challenge? Finally: I should at least have companions to drag me to safety if something went amiss.

I brushed all that aside as roughly as I did Felicia when she tried to hold me back. I shouted: "No, I'm going! I've spent more than half my life here, wishing for such a moment and never sure that it would come! Now it has I'm damned if I'll be cheated of my chance!"

In the distant corners of my mind rang echoes of loss - women who'd said they'd like to share my life and bear my children, a house I'd dreamed of by a crystal lake, that I could have built with my gratuity had I retired at normal age... Instead, a ball of icy rock, with only the majesty of Saturn in its sky to warrant staying.

And now - this.

No, I wasn't going to be deprived of my unique opportunity. I seized my suit. Reflexively, from decades of practice, I verified its condition: green, green, green, green, on everything including the automatic cameras and external radiation pickups. How much better this Mark 31 was than the old 29's that I was going forth to meet!

Were they Lotus's and Ivan's? I was coming to believe they must be. They weren't melting as the ship had melted. Unless, of course, they were imitations held in being by the grey wisps. Perhaps the "ship" had only lasted until they let go of it...

I thought for a moment Felicia was interfering with my suiting-up, and tensed to shout at her. But she wasn't. She was helping. Ashamed, I muttered thanks and sealed the helmet ring. Then I was in

the lock. Soft bags inflated round me, driving precious oxygen back into the dome, then collapsed as the outer door slid wide and I entered vacuum, switching off my radio so I could escape from any doubts and fears except my own.

How many times I'd walked these barren slopes! So many, I had worn deep tracks, unweathered, blurred a little by the constant infall of celestial dust, but durable, guaranteed to last perhaps until some future archeologist - human or not - came to puzzle over their arrangement as we had over the twists and braids of Saturn's rings, that mystery to which all unknowing Felicia had furnished the key. Why had no one spotted it before?

If the blind forces of nature could not explain the weaving and the curving, another not-blind force was known wasn't it?

We ourselves offered a perfect example.

How something as huge and cold as rings around a planet could generate (echo? imitate? equate to? Never mind: there would be new vocabularies after this) what we called interest and curiosity, I dared not guess. Why should I? Was I not on my way to find out at least the first fragment of an answer?

I bent my steps towards Leary's Sign, whither I had so often gone to chuckle at its silliness and remember with a catch in my throat two brave and lost explorers.

Braver than Olaf Tcherepnin.

You see, I could have been aboard that ship with Lotus. I wanted her; we all did, for she was so beautiful and so intelligent and such sheer fun to be around! But when it came to the final crew-selection tests, it turned out that I didn't want her enough. Enough to risk my life with her for company. I let myself do less than well. Ivan was chosen over me, by a tiny margin, two per cent. I think Lotus was sorry. I suspected so when she kissed me goodbye before the launch. By then it was too late.

If I had flown with her, and we'd survived, we would have gone to Earth together, and our future...

But the ship didn't survive, did it?

And here I was, having arrived so to say on automatic pilot, a few metres from Leary's Sign, its arms pointing like dead branches in inaccurate directions. Had the suits twisted it? Had the impact of the ship-that-wasn't loosened it in the friable ground? It didn't matter.

There were the suits. At this range I could see how right Felicia had been. Around their helmets writhed the wisps, braiding and twisting like the rings themselves.

A flash overhead - Fatima's viewer on the latest of its passes. This time the pictures would include me.

But I knew about human pictures, cramped into one octave of the radiation spectrum. What did these creatures see, detect, perceive - or was it this creature, one vast extended consciousness? I could no longer doubt that something

purposeful was controlling the suits. Five metres distant, they were stretching their arms wide. How could aliens be acquainted with our gesture meaning "I possess no weapon"?

They must have learned it from a human being...

What a fool I'd been to switch off my radio! Halting on a flat-topped rock, I nudged the control inside my helmet, and at once I heard, not the clamour of my argumentative fellow-residents, but a new voice, hesitant, as though rusty after long disuse. It spoke my name.

"O l a f Tcherepnin?"

My heart felt as though it might burst. I exclaimed, "Lotus!"

"Regrettably not. There was so little time to learn what it should do. It had not previously met separate identities. It had always been all one."

I calmed myself with vast effort. "Am I speaking to it? To all of it?"

"For the first time it exists in more than one part, a strange experience. It is here on what you call Tethys. It is also where it always has been."

The suits were motionless, but movement continued on the helmets, and a thread of mist reached out from one to unite with its counterpart on the other.

Making a braid. Making a twisting, weaving pattern like those of the rings, in miniature.

Hesitant, Hilary spoke in my helmet phones. "Olaf, this is incredible. You aren't playing the ventriloquist, are you?"

As steadily as I could I said, "No. It's real. And I think it's more intelligent than us."

And rushed on before anyone had time to contradict. "Could we have worked out from accidental samples of an alien species that their consciousness was different from ours? That they used verbal symbols to communicate? And recovered the symbols from their dying brains?"

I checked, and spoke to "it" again. "Is that how you did it?"

A muzzy sound like rapid computer traffic. Then: "It did not know there could be other and others. It knew nothing of speech, nor machines, nor" - again a



confused interruption - "protective coverings. It has always lived where it lives, and did not know it was alive."

"What?"

The question burst simultaneously from me and, I think, all those listening. I felt sure I recognised Felicia's voice among the rest.

"Until the time when it watched other creatures stop, it had always been itself and by itself. It had no" - buzz - "standard of comparison."

"You mean it didn't think it too could end?"

There was a dead pause, followed by renewed buzzing. One of the suits shed its misty covering completely and the other became totally enveloped in writhing vapour. I bit my lip, aware of having made a terrible faux pas. Whether Hilary said as much over the radio, or whether I imagined it, I couldn't tell and afterward still could not, for there was a blank in my memory.

Eventually, however, a welcome voice rang in my phones.

"Fatima here, Olaf. I instructed our viewers in the rings to monitor activity among the braiding, look for parallels with what's going on right in front of you. There's a match. A ninety-five per cent match!" And, in reproving tones a second later: "Don't sway like that! We're taking our main feed from your suit camera, remember?"

Hans chimed in. "Olaf, you're going to have to watch this when you get back to

London! The rings are going crazy! They're wriggling like a nest of snakes!"

I found my voice with difficulty. I said, "No wonder. I probably just wished our alien a nervous breakdown."

"You shouldn't have told it it can die!"

Felicia. No one else on Tethys would have had so little tact as to rub my nose in the second stupidest mistake of my existence... I cursed myself silently. At any rate I hoped it was silently.

There was no hint from the suits, only the continued weaving of the mist. Not like snakes, I decided, more like threads on a loom. Gradually it calmed. Despite visions of Norns and Parcae I dared to breathe normally again.

And the alien voice resumed.

"It finds the concept hard, but since it has divided a part from itself it can reason with the possibility that a separate part can end. Connected parts have in fact ended. Some did so when the human ship smashed through the ring."

"We apologise. It was not intentional," I said with as much sincerity as I could muster.

"It was not because of you. It had detected unfamiliar objects not belonging to it. It" - buzz - "decided to investigate. It discovered it possessed means not previously known to affect matter not composing itself."

Black fire blossomed in my head. I started to utter words that could have been fatal, could have doomed this unprecedented meeting, ruined everything. I wanted to shout, "You mean you killed Lotus and Ivan? You dragged their ship off course?"

After which I would have cursed it instead of myself.

But I fell off the rock I was standing on. I didn't believe it. How could I, in the minute gravity of Tethys? And of course it wasn't possible.

I'd been knocked off. By a determined, valiant leap. Following behind me, eavesdropping, Felicia had paused on a nearby outcrop, made an incredibly swift decision, and hurled herself straight at me. For someone unaccustomed to low gravity her aim was amazing. And, by a miracle, the alien stranger accepted our collision as behaviour normal to us, incomprehensible to it - or conceivably as analogous to the way its own components clashed in orbit. Not by radio, but faint and distorted via helmet-to-helmet contact, I heard her hiss,

"Shut up!"

I complied.

And just as well, too. Had it not been for her inspired act of censorship we might never have got on good enough terms with Ring - we call it that now, and always use the capital letter - to study the pseudo-spatial deformations which interlink its elements, permitting it to react like one coherent organism about two hundred times faster than if it were limited by the speed of light, and incidentally to move objects with which it has no apparent connection.

Action at a distance with a vengeance, that! No wonder we had trouble solving its orbital patterns. At least two of their vectors occupy "missing" dimensions.

Which is why the next crewed vessel to take off from Tethys is going to be the Tachys. Greek for fast. Very fast. We're not sure we'll be able to stop her before she leaves the Solar System. But if she does, and if our new computers that also exploit the "missing" dimensions are as well designed as we think they are, she'll be able to find her way back.

I hope so. I'd hate to lose Felicia as well as Lotus.

Me? Oh, there's no chance of Olaf going along. I'm far too old. Hilary is tipped as her most likely partner. But perhaps, if I pull a few strings, I may get a ride on her successor, or the next one after, or - one of these days.

Meantime, I'm still on Tethys. But life isn't boring any more. Not now Ring has acquired a taste for casual conversation. Some of the subjects it enjoys are sort of weird, but that's to be expected.

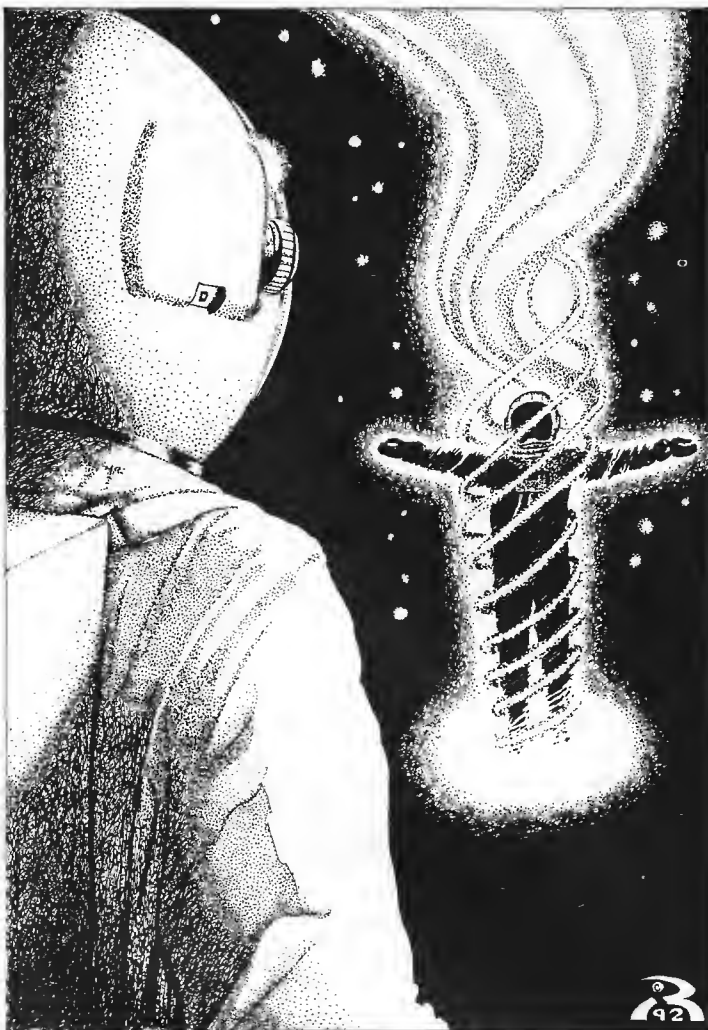
As to the suits...

Well, naturally Ring had never evolved the concept of a memorial. It remembered what happened to it, except when something knocked out part of its memory - like an intruding planetoid - after which as far as it was concerned that wasn't history any more. But the idea of something outside itself, which could provoke it into theorising about events it might have forgotten or never been aware of: that made the braids churn like crazy!

So now the suits once worn by Lotus and Ivan stand next to Leary's Sign, and there's a plaque, and pieces of their ship that we had overlooked but Ring knew the location of and returned to us along with their bodies, which of course we had flown back to Earth for burial. And everyone who comes here to meet Ring and chat with it - which means just about every distinguished scientist who's fit enough to fly space - calls to pay respects. Some of them bring flowers.

What kind? Why, lotus flowers, of course.

And I don't know whether to go on



being ashamed, or try and feel proud instead. I don't suppose I ever shall... unless one day I pluck up courage to ask Ring.

[My thanks to Ian Ridpath for advising me as to the most likely identity of this moon of Saturn. - JKHB]

John Brunner has been a working writer most of his life, specialising in but not limited to SF and fantasy. He has published about ninety books and well over 200 shorter items. He has won the Hugo for best SF novel of the year, the British Fantasy Award, the British SF Award, a Bronze Porgie award from "THE WEST COAST REVIEW OF BOOKS" in California, the French "PRIX APOLLO", the Italian "COMETA D'ARGENTO", THE Spanish "GIGAMESH" award....



THE HARD

By Andy Sawyer

“Pedlar! Pedlar!”

Taylor cursed the unseen caller. Did he have to be reminded of his humiliation in tramping remote byways, selling ribbons, gloves, almanacs and ballads instead of packing the theatres of Kaerlud?

“Pedlar!”

Turning slowly, he looked back along the path for the owner of the voice. He saw only the brambles he'd stripped for his dinner. Their slashes still galled his wrists, their purple juice bruised his fingers. Overhead, oak leaves played come-and-go with sunbeams. Piss on the country: lords' daughters may dress up as shepherdesses and falala with lambkins, but it was in clean muslin, not rough calico. Give them a nettle sting and they go weeping home to mama. Who knew what rogue or ruffler may leap out at a man who walked highways and footpaths rather than familiar streets or alleys? Pack on the ground for manoeuvrability, back to a tree for safety, Taylor fingered his dagger nervously.

“Pedlar!” The fourth shout rang with exasperation. Footsteps. One man, not heavy, half-way between a decisive march and a stumbling run. Not the steps of an ambusher, unless there was a comrade shifting silently through the undergrowth while Taylor's attention was distracted. This voice was human: not the shrill tones of a mocking Stranger or Earthkin; Mab's folk were scarce in this region. In any case, Taylor knew better than to respond in any way. Since the wheel of Kaerlud's fortune had replaced Taylor's patron with My Lord Witchfinder, and rope and fire for those who recognised the realm's occult parallel, Taylor had no wish to attract the attention of those who remembered his masques and comedies for the wrong reasons. The voice was that of a man used to response when he shouted: not a lord or a gentleman, who would not be in these remote parts alone or on foot. The word's vowels were locally flat, but deformed by education. Not young, but without the quiver of age.

“Ho!”

A speedier rustle of woodland trash, overlaid with puffing and blowing. “Good day, your reverence.”

“You knew it was I, following?”

Taylor dismissed the parson's confusion with a gesture. Let him work it out. He bent to unlace his pack. “You've run a long way for an almanac.”

The parson shook his head and sucked air. He had the look of one who rarely ran any distance for anything. Small, but weightier than he ought to be. He fidgeted with his dishevelled clothing as if it embarrassed

him.

“Three miles back...” he began.

Taylor sat against a tree. If the other man noticed this insolence in a pedlar he gave no sign save for shuffling awkwardly from foot to foot, as if he too wished to sit but felt that it was beneath his dignity. “You sold some spices to a woman and told her you were making for Castle Saint Catherine,” he continued, as if ignoring an interruption to a sermon. “I would like you to deliver, to the bishop there, this letter.”

Taylor examined the paper. It was sealed, but the inscription on the outside indicated to whom it was to be delivered. The writing was fluent enough. If it was the parson's, Taylor had seen worse. Every time he set pen to paper, for example.

“Why?”

The misunderstanding was natural enough. The parson held out a coin. “There will be five of these when the letter is delivered.”

Taylor was used to accepting gratuities for services, but there were reasons why he preferred to know why he served.

“No - I mean, why me? A travelling pedlar you have not seen before in your life. You must be able to communicate with Bishop Ibbotson by more regular means than a stranger who for all you know will take your letter and deliver it to the next ditch with one angel safely secured against the inconvenience to be got by the windy promise of six.”

There was an understanding in the parson's eye. He knew now that Taylor was no half-literate pedlar, and with this knowledge came suspicion. He was sweating far more than could be explained by his exertions.

“I have urgently to send a message to the Bishop's castle,” he explained. It was obviously the truth, but no more than he had said to start with. Taylor considered taking the man's money and unsealing the letter to discover if the answer to his question was there, but the parson was looking so cow-eyed that it broke his heart to think of deceiving him.

“Once,” he began, “A tinker I knew stopped at the house of a queer cuffin - that's a Justice of the Peace to you, your reverence. It was an honest enough call, but as my friend was mending the pans, the master of the house was wondering where he had seen him before. Alas, the poor tinker had plied a different and less respectable trade in another part of the country where once this gentleman had had business. On his departure, my friend was given a letter for the jailor in the town for which he was heading. Imagine, sir, his surprise when the letter turned out to be a

request that irons were to be put on his feet until the assizes, when he was sentenced and duly hanged. Now I admit to nothing so shady in my past: nevertheless...”

It was a good enough story and may even have happened once; in his pack Taylor had no less than three chapbooks containing different versions of it, two of which he had written himself. It only distracted the clergyman further. Taylor never thought of himself as a particularly charitable man, but nor did he derive pleasure from taunting the innocent.

“Tell me,” he said. “At worst I can only bring on the danger you fear is inevitable. At best, I can try to help. Tell me.”

Both men sat beside the tree. The parson had noticed that Taylor had completely dropped the manner of respect due to a superior and was talking to him man-to-man, but he was not prepared to argue about it. It was this - for the tubby little man was as perfectly pompous as any country priest Taylor had seen displayed to the life upon the stage - which convinced him that here was a man who needed help.

The story came slowly.

“The woman you sold spices to: she once had a daughter. The daughter was married to a young man who was journeyman to the blacksmith. They had two children, both living.”

Taylor nodded. The priest was grieving. Whatever the story, it had tragedy in it.

“Do you know whose lands these are?”

Taylor shook his head.

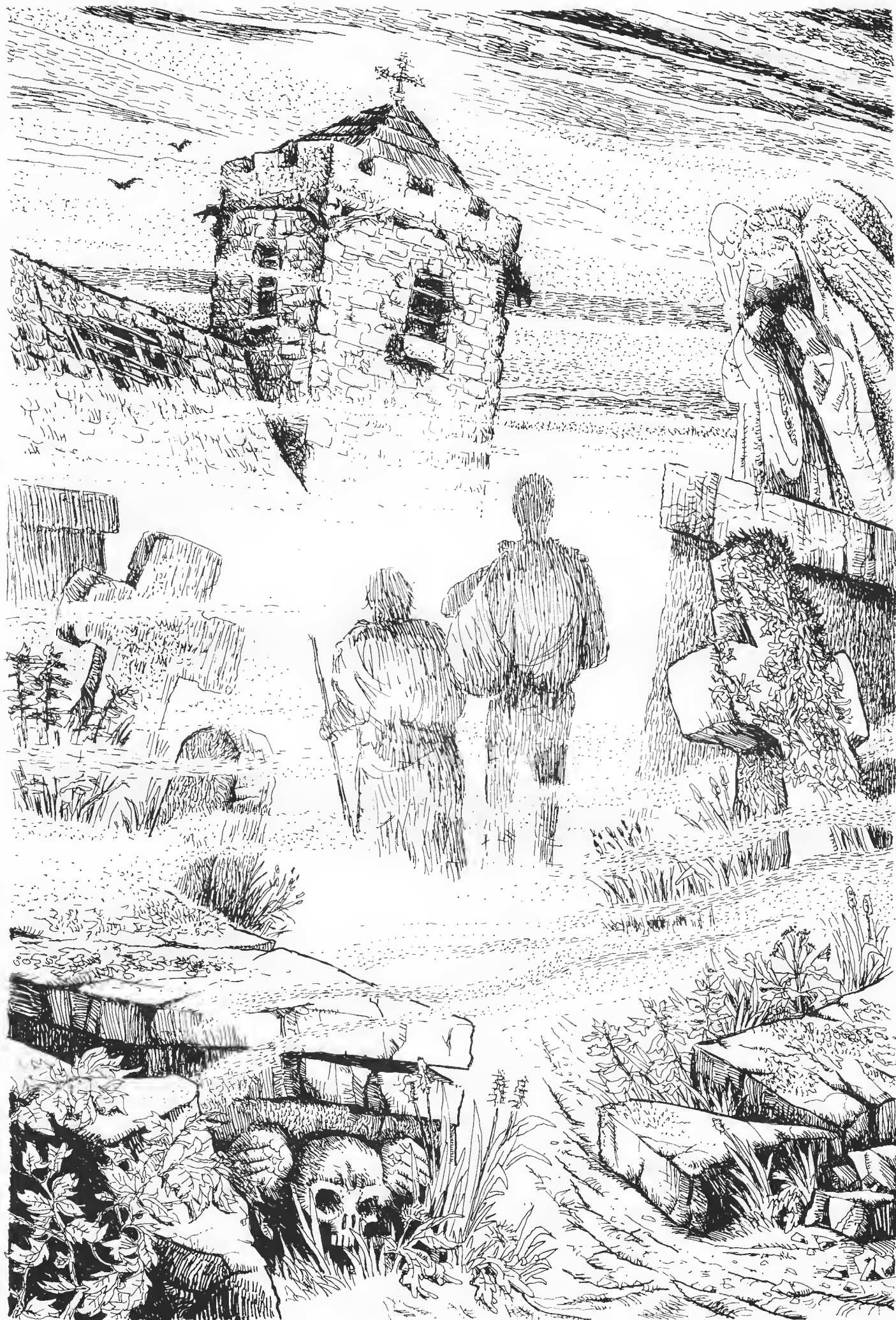
“They belong to Sir Aristotle Lilly.”

Taylor spluttered. The parson smiled, all sign of his former haughtiness forgotten. “Poor man, he cannot help his name - better an unfortunate name than an unfortunate nature, is what I always used to think. He is neither rich nor powerful, but he is connected to Bishop Ibbotson and has what counts as wealth and influence in these remote parts where half my flock are starved heathens who pray to Saint Cross and Saint Cubit because they are among the few words they remember from the Bible. He is looked up to with awe because he has a small retinue of serving-men.

“One of these men calls himself Captain Pye. He attached himself to Sir Aristotle like a leech and has lived off him ever since. I...hear things about him. He takes what he is not given, but he prefers to take rather than to merely receive. Especially with valuable property and...people.”

“Women?”

“On occasion. Molly's daughter was ravished by him. He swore to return and take her again. He did so despite the presence of her husband, who was forced to watch. That night, the husband broke into



Sir Aristotle's house and stole a pistol. I cannot say what gave him the courage or ability to use it, but he shot Captain Pye as he was lying in his bed."

"And this letter - "Taylor brandished it - "is to ask the Bishop to use his influence with his kinsmen for clemency?"

"No. It is to ask for help to deal with the Captain. Who rose from his bed and slew the husband with his bare hands, though his blanket was burned with the shot-blast and he himself had only a blue bruise on his chest where the pistol-ball bounced off it."

Taylor considered. He handed back the letter and shook his head.

The parson tried to regain the relationship of cleric to pedlar and failed. He looked more as if he were about to weep. Taylor sat back and allowed himself the one luxury left him. His course of action had been predestined ever since he heard the story, but at least he could watch the storyteller sweat before he got his reward. They'd done it to him often enough.

It was five miles to the parsonage and it was dark and raining by the time they arrived. Despite his physical discomfort, Taylor was pleased. They'd not been seen, at least. Most of the way was by tracks winding in and out of the forest. The fields, such as they were, were empty, and they avoided Harefield, the huddle of shacks which the parson was pleased to dub the village. The church was crumbling and the churchyard full of cracked gravestones and tumbled monuments. It looked as if half the village dead had arrived early at Resurrection Day. Taylor kicked an angel's fist aside as they took a short-cut past the church wall. In the half-light, the parson looked apologetic as a stranger encountered his decrepit parish.

Bishop Ibbotson would have received an urgent message from these quarters with as much favour as a Kaerlud lord sonnets from a scrivener's apprentice. Taylor was somewhat more tactful in explaining this to the priest.

If the priest's housekeeper was surprised when she saw her master return with a bedraggled pedlar, she did not show it. She handed them towels, and set off to find food. Taylor allowed himself some idle speculation about their relationship (she was comely enough, with good hips and eyes, but he suspected the priest would never have initiated extending kitchen-service into something more intimate; he had not even thought to ask Taylor's name, nor given his own) and wondered if there might be some pleasurable outcome to this diversion after all. He hung his cloak by the fire to dry, and gratefully accepted bread and cheese. The ale they drank was strong, and surprisingly good.

"First," said Taylor, "give me that letter." Without looking at it again, he threw it on the fire, waving aside the parson's interjection. "You don't want any suspicion to fall upon you, or any connection between us other than this night's lodging. I will sleep in an outhouse ..." - it was worse than the bed the parson might have offered, but certainly superior to a wet night by the roadside - "... and so far as anyone knows, we have neither conversed nor eaten to-

gether."

"Win will not say anything, but I fear I do not understand ..."

"If this Captain Pye knows you are plotting against him, he will kill again," emphasised Taylor through a mouthful of heavy bread.

"Oh, I know *that*," replied the parson in a tone of such owlish naivety that Taylor fell in love with him on the spot as one of nature's heroes.

"Listen, sir priest. Your Bishop, as I said, can do little if what I think about this villain Pye is true. Certainly, he would need a band of soldiers to back up his word and there are few men-at-arms who would obey the word of a churchman against one of their kind, even if we could get a reply out of the Bishop - or his secretary's clerk - by the time the next winter's snow melts. I think I know a better way. But first, I must enter your lord Aristotle's household. And not as a pedlar."

"Which you are not." As if it hadn't been dawning upon him for some time.

Taylor introduced himself, not without a touch of dramatic flourish. He might as well have announced himself the queen of the fairies. "There are booksellers in Castle Saint Catherine who know of my works," he muttered lamely. Well, fame spreads her cloak unevenly around the land, and in any case the fewer who knew of his whereabouts the better, especially if the allies he hoped to enlist were willing to lend their attention to human affairs. Not understanding the awkwardness of the celebrity uncelebrated, the parson attempted to cover it by introducing himself. His name was Thomas Nabbes, which Taylor supposed was slightly less back-country than the name of the local lordling. He suspected that the parson came from humbler origins than his vowels and bearing suggested with a name like that, but good luck to him if he had. It hadn't made him rich - their utensils were plain pewter and the room was sparsely furnished even for a country parson - but that he'd stepped from the fields to a roof over his head with so little apparent worldly cunning spoke volumes for his inner determination.

Meeting him in Kaerlud, Taylor would have gull-groped him without a second thought. Here, in his own territory, Nabbes the parson seemed altogether more admirable. Once he realised that Taylor was a man with more connections to the nobility than he would ever achieve in a lifetime of preaching sermons to ploughboys and serving-maids, he refrained from asking why such a virtuoso of the literary art was not where he belonged. This may even, thought Taylor, have been tact.

But it suited him well, and he returned to the matter at hand.

"Tell me about good Sir Aristotle. And tell me where I may speak with the woman whose husband was killed. I need to know as much about master Pye as I can, and she might reveal things about him which others may not know."

The parson's expression returned to its mournful setting. "The first I can do easily enough; there are few enough gentry in this country, and we know each other well. Sir Aristotle attends my church and he is

pleased to compliment me upon my sermons. I have dined with him frequently, although I admit that since I began to admonish him about the behaviour of his men, and Captain Pye in particular, that favour has come my way less and less. The second - well, that is not possible. Pye went to her a third time, with the blood of her husband wet on his hands.

"Knowing he was outside, she took up a knife. And used it - but not on him, I am afraid. Her two children were with her; she dispatched them before using the blade on herself."

In another environment, Taylor would have turned the parson's story into a bloody drama for gaping citizens. Out where the story had happened to real folk, he felt a sympathy words rarely instilled in him. He tried to disguise his feelings with a jest, but even his humour had a sour edge: "I once swore I'd be no more a serving-man. But we are all serving-men of of sorts, I suppose."

"But even with my recommendation, I cannot be sure Sir Aristotle ..."

"No, this is not for you." Taylor's pack and bags were across the room, safely away from the fire. He began to unstrap. "You have not yet met with falconers in this country, I believe?"

The parson screwed up his features in puzzlement. "Oh yes, many of the gentry play at hawking. But Sir Aristotle is hardly a devotee of the recreation."

Taylor laughed. "No, Sir Aristotle himself is the bird, and this ..." he held up a gilt and beribboned book, clothed in fine vellum - "is the lure. And these are my tools. I assume you have sufficient ink in your study for your sermons?"

Taylor had known priests who never wrote out their sermons because they could barely write their names; others who scribbled down every turgid sentence and inkhorn phrase they could think of and persuaded compliant stationers that they were adding to the world's stock of virtue if they loaded down their stalls with sermons in print. Nabbes was neither one nor the other but, fortunately, especially not the former. Taylor laid out his "tools" - a box of finely-cast italic type and several sheets which appeared to praise a blank space as a fit recipient of the following verses in terms which would have made a starving scholar thrown a sixpence blush to write them.

"These poems are fresh from the Muse, save your reverence," he said. They are, at least, my own." He examined the dedicatory sheets, frowning at the stale insinuations and musty sentences. They were his too, but he forebore to mention that.

"Should I grovel? Or should I boast of my own virtues? Tell me more about this Sir Aristotle ..."

"My gracious Lord ..."

It was always easier to overpraise the rural gentry, Taylor felt. He bowed low, cap sweeping the ground. The tall, delicate man who was obviously Sir Aristotle pulled his horse to a halt and looked irresolutely towards the house. Two roughs in grey jerkins could be seen by the door. Taylor pretended he had not noticed them.

Sir Aristotle tugged his beard. His line-



age might have been doubtful once one passed his grandsires, but he was aristocrat enough to respond to a stranger's accosting with no more than a raised eyebrow. Acting his own part, Taylor added a diffident stammer to his words as he introduced himself as a University scholar en route to Castle Saint Catherine and detouring to bring greetings from a kinsman of Sir Aristotle.

"... and for Sir William has seen fit to show me some tokens of his generosity, and has talked often of your virtues as man and scholar, I have caused some drainings of my own wit to be printed in the hope that I can thereby express my duty and love to your lordship."

"What's this? a book?"

Taylor passed up the volume. It was received with appropriate disdain as Sir Aristotle flicked through the leaves and examined the verses. They were indeed poor stuff: the kind of rambling pastoral full of tripping nymphs and impossibly wise Hobbinols which could well have been written by a sex-starved student with more romanticism than sense, or a High Lord looking out of his window on a spring morning and wondering what was rising in the blood of his tennants beside malnutrition and envy. But it was not the quality of the verse which mattered. Head bowed, but with eyes slanted upwards, Taylor noticed how the expression and posture of the man on the horse did not change, but how a glow of self-satisfaction seemed to surround him whenever he came across the important feature of the gift.

No man can resist his own name in a book. If it is not his own creation, then another man's, given to the world in his name, is an acceptable substitute.

"You are a scholar, you say?"

"Yes, my lord. A poor one, but, my masters are pleased to say, a diligent one."

Taylor hoped that Sir Aristotle would not conclude that a student of his age was also, *ipso facto* a block-headed one, but the lord's attention was still on the book's pages rather than on the features of the man who had given it to him.

"I will peruse this on my ride. On my return, you may tell me more of my kinsman." A wave towards the house brought one of the jacketed roughs trotting towards them. "My man Matthew will give you food and drink."

As the knight rode off to keep his self-satisfaction to himself, Matthew arrived to inspect Taylor with all the welcome given to a potential rival. Taylor gave his broadcast

and most insincere smile. He doubted that his hospitality would be of the highest quality, but it was not the serving-man he was trying to impress.

"Who's this ragged-ar-se half-gallant?"

The speaker was the smaller of the two men who swaggered into the kitchen just as Taylor had been introduced to a plate of better viands than the sulking Matthew had at first offered him. The interview with Sir Aristotle had gone well; Taylor had his role as starving scholar to the life and had dropped enough incidental comments about this kinsman of Sir Aristotle (whom the lord had seen scarcely as often as had Taylor and that was never) to give colour to his background. With what the parson had told him and what he had seen within five minutes, Taylor had the knight in print as one of those half-educated gentry who spend a year at the University and think of themselves as starved for culture for the rest of their lives. Taylor had talked airily of poetry, thrown enough jargon from rhetoric and logic into the conversation to earn himself a Mastership of Arts, and expertly avoided any questions regarding State policy and Arts Occult, disclaiming all opinions except narrow orthodoxy.

So pleased was Sir Aristotle to have a real scholar and a poet to boot in his household that he offered his guest the opportunity to break his journey to Castle Saint Catherine for as long as he liked; instead, to take up employment with him, for he was in need of a secretary. Hoping but not altogether convinced that this would not mean that Sir Aristotle would end up showing his own verses for approval, Taylor had accepted with sufficient show of gratitude to cause Matthew to spit and mutter as soon as he and Taylor had been dismissed from the knight's parlour. No doubt word was travelling around the household that there was a new addition to the retinue, and the two swaggerers had come to inspect the newcomer.

Taylor examined the speaker carefully, noting his red curls and aggressive whiskers and lines of corruption which scored his face. Matthew's jealousy was one thing. This spitfire with his arm already groping around the breasts of a cook was another.

"My name is Taylor, lately engaged as Sir Aristotle's secretary. And you?"

He left the woman alone - Taylor marked her disgust as he touched her and her relief mingled with concern as he moved towards a new victim - and stared at Taylor as if he had been deposited before him by a lady's

house-cat. He was smaller than Taylor but looked as if he weighed more. His heavy nose twitched, like the beak of a hungry falcon. His dark-mustachioed, short-haired companion stayed at his shoulder, but Taylor discounted him as the kind of man who would glower and threaten but never act on his own; as dangerous as a puppet-show. Hawk-nose was something different. There was only one man he could be, but Taylor had to play the stranger and act half-convinced by the man's bluster.

He forced a tremor to his knees as he was inspected. The smile which fell upon him was as unpleasant and any he had ever seen.

"I am Sir Aristotle's captain. My name is Carlo Pye, but my underlings call me 'Captain'."

A pause.

I have written more convincing villains than you in the evening before the play was due to be performed, thought Taylor, but all he did was lick dry lips with quivering tongue, and provide the expected response to his cue.

"I see; Captain."

The companion grinned to see another interloper put in his place. Pye smiled too, but he obviously remained suspicious. He was clearly no easy man to fool and though he might swagger and browbeat, he obviously checked his victims' reactions. Too obsequious, and a victim's life would be a misery: too firm, and he would be a rival. Taylor thought he had the response correct, but it was hard to tell. He took the initiative.

"I am a poor scholar, Captain, but I do have a pouch of good tobacco which if you wish to share ..."

Later, befuddled with smoke, Taylor felt Captain Pye shake him by the hand and heard him say what a good fellow he was for a poxy psalm-singing student. He made himself grin apishly, loathing the feel of the man's flesh. Pye clapped him on the back, stuffed the tobacco-pouch inside his own jerkin, and staggered off, bawling a woman's name.

Taylor felt sorry for the woman, but the tobacco was no loss. It was foul stuff anyway.

After twenty-four hours in Sir Aristotle's house, Taylor felt that Pye's place was accurately defined. To put it simply, he ran the house, coming and going as he pleased. His only real task, apparently, was to collect rents and deal with tradesmen, at both of which his menacing approach stood him

in good stead. Most of the rest of the household - which was not large, even for back-country gentry - were terrified of the man, encouraging him in his excesses lest they be the next target. His relationship with Sir Aristotle was difficult to define. They never spoke, except to give instructions or to report, which was odd. Whether Pye was a genuine Captain or no, he was a man of some background and closer in rank to Sir Aristotle than any of the rest of the household. Taylor himself had found the knight positively garrulous at times as he inquired what news the "student" had picked up on his travels. Clearly Pye was some hold over his master, but what it was, Taylor could not tell. He suspected it was sexual, but Pye remained that night in the cramped room (made even more cramped by Taylor's arrival) he shared with the other men of the household, and Sir Aristotle did not seem to look at the man with the suppressed lust Taylor would have expected. Perhaps it was just the dominance which spilled out of the Captain, a flood of overwhelming arrogance which created a victim out of whoever he spoke to, almost without the wit or heed of Pye himself.

Whatever, he was not a normal man. He had touched Taylor twice, and each time he had betrayed himself. The touch of his flesh sharpened Taylor's own senses; Pye had the taint of magic about him. It was unfortunate that Taylor could only reveal this by letting his own sensibility be known. Secret talents are best detected by those with similar gifts ...

A secretary's duties were of the lightest. Taylor's, it seemed, were to draft invitations to the local gentry for a dinner at which he supposed he would be chief exhibit as "My scrivener and poet, Master Taylor", and required to read some of his alleged verses. After that, the day was his own. Sir Aristotle went on one of his accustomed rides through his estate, accompanied by the Captain and his men. He made sure no-one saw him depart, but even if they had, what reason to suspect a student for making acquaintance with the local parson?

Before he left, Taylor entered the room in which he, Pye, Matthew and the other manservant had sweltered the night through, sharing each other's body odours and vermin. As befitting his status, Pye had slept alone on a straw pallet, stretched on a truckle-bed which had been stacked against the wall. The blanket Pye had wrapped around him had been thrown on the floor during the night. Taylor examined it. It was a filthy, threadbare woollen length which bore faint traces of having once been a more luxurious item, possibly from Sir Aristotle's own bed. The wool from which it was made was not local; the livestock which crawled through its fibres emphatically were. Taylor examined the rents and tears.

Most were obviously due to wear or vermin. Ignoring the blanket's smell, Taylor put one small hole closer to his eye. The hole was round, surrounded by a black halo, which Taylor rubbed between finger and thumb. He looked at and sniffed the residue. There was no scent left that he could detect, but it was obvious enough that the hole had been caused by a pistol ball.

Nabbes greeted him nervously. His housekeeper regarded them both with a secretive smile. The parson obviously trusted her and spoke openly; too openly for Taylor's liking, but that was his business.

"You have met Sir Aristotle - and his captain?"

Taylor nodded. He was swallowing at the time.

"And can this villain be brought to justice?"

"To justice, no. To revenge, possibly."

The parson frowned at Taylor's bluntness. "You tell *me* the difference between justice which hangs a man, and revenge?" asked Taylor, but carried on speaking before Nabbes could embarrass himself. "Carlo Pye could be hanged. But my good and generous lord Sir Aristotle would need the testimony of his own eyes before he could bring himself to believe that his swaggering captain was anything other than a rough good fellow. I think we can rule out the action of laws and courts this side of our lifespans.

"Other forms of execution cannot be used on this man. Your parishoner who shot at him might just as well have attempted to frighten him to death with a grimace."

"What do you mean?"

"Carlo Pye is what is known as a 'hard man'. Have you come across such? No matter. There is a herb found in certain forests which, if given to children, makes them shot-free. They grow up to be 'hardmen', invulnerable to bullet or blade. Some say that a silver bullet will see to them: myself I doubt it. I don't think that their charm works by such magic. I do know that they can be beaten to death, or hanged, but I'd wager you countryfolk will not take the risk of lynching the servant of a gentleman, no matter how overbearing."

Winifred spoke for the first time. There was bitterness in her voice. "No-one here will raise his hand to any of the gentry - no-one with family or friends."

"I would ..." Taylor raised his eyebrows and the parson shook his head. "Nothing ... So what do we do?"

"This village is called Harefield. That calls to my mind one first step and from then on you have better leave everything to me. I don't mean to give you instructions, Parson Nabbes, but - well, you are a parson and there are things which parsons try hard not to see."

Taylor rose. "So if the village is called Harefield, you need to show me the site of the original field. I'll find the hare, myself."

The day was still warm, but getting colder as the sun's progress moved from afternoon to evening. Taylor sat with two pipes. One he smoked from, allowing the exhaled aroma to spread around him. Occasionally he blew, and sparks jumped from the pipe's bowl and flew about him like evening fireflies. The other pipe was once he picked up at intervals: a home-made musical instrument which fluted a weak tone, wavering and wandering in volume as Taylor's fingers moved towards and away from the holes. Despite his confidence in front of the parson, he wondered whether he would get any result. He had never done this before, but that did not mean it

would not work. Or so he hoped.

There was plenty of life around him. Finches darted in the trees which bordered the stream, keeping a wary guard for hawks. Dippers and wagtails hunted among the stones. Insects hummed invisibly in the grasses, seeing in the small birds what they in turn saw in the birds of prey they lurked among leaves to avoid. Taylor drew a mental picture of how much life in the City resembled that of the creatures of the wild, but discarded it as too obvious. People had been told that for generations. So far, they hadn't done much with the information.

Deciding that this stranger was harmless, the fat conies in the warren to his left came out to play and feed. More trite parallels. They looked and acted just like Kaerlud tradesmen, hopping about self-importantly but never going far from their burrows lest they see something of the world. There was probably a fox or a weasel about, but the conies showed little sign of nervousness. Taylor thought of his city friends Jack-in-a-box and Ratsey and almost laughed at the thought of them sneaking around in a country warren with blood on their chops.

Let the conies look to their own devices. They hardly knew he was there; the wind was blowing Taylor's sparks and notes away from the warren and to the open fields on his right. He looked for motion among the corn. *There!* There it was, a shifting, leaping form, now coming towards him, now away; zig-zagging and darting, freezing against a convenient background so that all could be distinguished was a brown heap. The twitch of a nose and the wave of an ear was a signal. Taylor sat still and put down his pipes, laying his hands on his thighs, palms facing upwards and outwards. With apparently random motion - back, forwards, sideways, each leap a spastic departure from the ground with no sign as to where its feet would next fall - the hare covered the distance between the field and Taylor and halted twenty feet away from him, eyes fixed on his and ears cocked towards him.

"I won't ask you who taught you the summoning, for I'm sure you won't tell me."

Taylor smiled. Hares were all the same; sardonic little beasts, full of self-importance because of their relationship with Mab's folk, but with little respect for anyone or anything including themselves. Hares took everything seriously and treated the whole of creation as a game. Perhaps that was why Taylor liked them.

"Aren't we wasting time?"

Taylor spoke aloud. He had heard that hares could understand thoughts - that was certainly how they communicated to men, for there was nothing in a hare's mouth or throat that could form words - but he preferred to speak.

"I need help."

The hare's ears twitched. Partly this was its way of keeping aware of its background, for however artful a hare may be, it was still hot flesh and blood between a fox's jaws. Partly it was amusement at the man's deliberate avoidance of a greeting. Those who summoned occult beasts or dwellers on other spheres were generally fulsome in their praise and gratitude. Taylor could rarely be bothered. Either they

would help because they wanted to, or because the summoner had sufficient power to compel. Flattery normally served to make the flatterer feel better. Taylor had few illusions about his ability to charm a hare with words.

In a low voice, Taylor explained his need. It was as an act of low but powerful magic, one which would reverberate - and summon again, but this time summon on the earthly plane.

"You cannot compel My Lord Witchfinder," said the hare.

"I cannot compel you, but you came," replied Taylor, and the distance between them shook with the hare's amusement.

The slide of the knife from the tiny scabbard at Taylor's waist was the start of it all; the intention which prefigured the act which would shriek magic; whose and for what purpose intentionally too nebulous to be discerned but which would, Taylor hoped at least, draw watchers near. Like most men whose business was the beautifying of pain, Taylor hated it when applied in the real world. He felt the hare's laughter itch again at the back of his mind as he hesitated, then slashed, wildly. "*I could at least have rolled my sleeve up first,*" he thought as the knife's sharp point cut cloth, skin and flesh. Crimson spurted, then slowed; there was no pain, then all the world was a thin line of agony. That too faded, but a fiery residue swept up and down Taylor's left arm.

Before the blood could congeal, the hare had burrowed its head inside the parted cloth, licking and swallowing. "You don't have to enjoy it," said Taylor between gritted teeth. The mental itch became unbearable as the hare's physical form wriggled closer. It ceased as the knife rose and fell again and blood and shit from the dying beast slimed those of Taylor's garments untouched by his own gore. Quickly, he gutted the hare and ate the relevant organs, ingesting his own blood with the creature's offal, completing the circle and the first half of the magic. He forced his last swallow as the circumference of the sun touched the horizon, and lay back, feeling ill and dizzy.

If My Lord Witchfinder's scryers were doing their job efficiently, they would sense that something strange had happened in Harefield. Taylor hoped that none of them were quite as efficient as to discover exactly what...

Not horsemen, but a carriage rattled along the driveway to the house, and Taylor's heart sank. If someone had been present to whom he could have confided, he would have winked and quipped, "Well, I am just too good at what I do." Alone, and forced to be honest, it was a disaster. Minor magics brought minor investigators and hired killers. Major transgressions brought My Lord Witchfinder himself, when he could spare the time.

At the worst case, the beautiful youth who was being helped out of the carriage by men who wore on their backs more revenue than this back-country manor saw in a year, and who was being greeted effusively by a man who could not have comprehended that he was doing exactly what his charges did to him - at worst this paragon

was there because Taylor had revealed himself and he wanted to know why. When High Lords betrayed a direct interest in their rivals' minions, it was time to consider your future carefully. There might not be much of it. Even the best case Taylor could think of involved the possibility of his own discovery. All Sir Aristotle had to do was boast of "My Secretary ..."

The High Lord was shorter than Sir Aristotle - even delicate-looking like him, but he stood, and others regarded him. A casual gesture of the hand, and Sir Aristotle followed its movement with every cell of his body. It was not even conscious domination. No voices reached Taylor, but in the postures of the bodies in the courtyard was all he needed to know. No man who had journeyed day and night and still wore around wrists and neck lace ruffs of such pristine perfection could be otherwise than mastery incarnate. It was as if he had *refused* to let the dust of travel settle upon him.

From a window, Taylor observed the mime of power, and wondered what to do as the group returned to the house.

Behind him, the hard man creaked floorboards, and made the decision for him.

Pye's face was contorted with rage and fear, his nose more like a tearing hook than ever. "Scholar!"

Taylor noted the doorway leading to the gallery. He nodded.

"Witchfinder arrives within days of you. I'm no fool. I can add." There was a knife in his hand longer than Taylor's dirk, which was useless anyway. Steel and a stronger man brought complex plans crashing down as thoroughly as did the Lord who hated magic. Pye fainted and slashed. Taylor rocked backwards to avoid the blow, and ran for the stairs. As he entered the gallery from above, so did Sir Aristotle from below, guiding his guest. Parson Nabbes was in the party, but showed no recognition of the intruder. Witchfinder's head was turned away from Taylor, but the sound of his footsteps caused it to turn - in hardly so vulgar a reaction as alarm, or even curiosity, but to know what may be intruding on his perfect world.

Taylor snatched his dagger and sliced. The half-healed scar spilled blood, threw illusion. Taylor leaped. In pain, face twisted, he cavorted like some clown in an after-the-play jig, boots leaving soiled prints upon the white cloths lain upon a chest, heels kicking up the rushes strewn upon the floor to spread freshness in the air, floorboards rattling like drums. Into the room came the



young woman Pye had abused on Taylor's first night in the house. She squealed. The tray she carried towards the nobility crashed; goblets rolled. Red wine gushed, wiping out the spots of Taylor's blood on the floor in front of her. There was still a chance to rework this wreckage into a workable plot. Not allowing his motions to be predictable, in front of an audience from which any form of reaction other than mesmeristic fascination was failure, Taylor whirled. A screen clattered. Months of tapestry-work was ripped violently from a wall and trampled on. Mouth working silently in invocation, he somersaulted and danced, gaze kept upon the faces of the men by the stairs. Their jaws were comically low. *But what did they see?*

A hare, a lunatic man? The reaction of any crowd would have been the same, up until the climax. It was that which would make the difference. Muscles tore and twisted and cramped, limbs bent in unnatural angles. Floor-splinters drew blood from Taylor's cheeks.

He leaped towards Pye, in a final gambol. Dropping his dagger, Pye opened his arms to catch him in an automatic reaction. Taylor pressed himself to his bosom, breathing in his body aroma in a foul parody of possession. Greasy curls ticked the back of his neck. All stilled. Only the severed blood-vessels in Taylor's arms throbbed and oozed fluid.

Some of it dropped onto Pye's flesh. Taylor felt his adversary's reaction, saw with inner sight what the man was seeing and knew that he knew what was happening. Pye saw and - most hideously - *felt* both hare and man. The woman only saw her abuser with his familiar burrowing beneath his shirt. She knew where the knife had fallen, and was nearer than the gentles and servant-men. But she wavered. Time

stopped.

Then Parson Nabbes stepped forward. "Do not commit the sin of murder, daughter," he said. "This is a witch and his familiar. If to kill such is a sin, it is my sin." He took the knife from her.

Pye's scream as the knife struck his flesh was of despair, not pain. The blade turned. Witchfinder's smile was the most frightening thing Taylor had ever seen in his life. He danced past him, not daring to touch him, skin crawling; down stairs, and found a horse, but not before a voice shouted again "The hare!" Parson Nabbes was chasing nothing down the manor's pathway. Tearing his wound with his own teeth, Taylor used the blood and pain to cast the illusion from him, to dance and skip in front of the parson for all to see. He rode the horse the other way. Someone would notice it was missing in a few minutes, but by then he would be out of sight.

Packing his things as the priest spoke, Taylor half-listened to his relation of the final moments of Captain Pye. A hard man may be invulnerable to blows but not to the attentions of six armed guards and a rope.

"Sir Aristotle is desolate. His favourite is hanging from a tree in his park, and I will not be invited to sup with him for some time. My Lord Witchfinder thinks I am a clever priest but will not be bestowing too much of his favour upon me for acting so forwardly. The people of Harefield are glad to be rid of an oppressor."

"Until the next one," muttered Taylor under his breath. The parson cocked his head in interrogation, but Taylor remained silent. After a puzzled pause, the parson

continued.

"Sir Aristotle, of course, convinced My Lord that he knew nothing of Captain Pye's witchery - not difficult, for he did know nothing. Fortunately, I wasn't asked. I may be a clever priest, but My Lord Witchfinder has a low enough opinion of the capacities of my profession. He may be right," he concluded with a rueful shrug. "I still don't know what you did, and I don't want to ask."

Winifred passed Taylor the remainder of his possessions, which he stored in his pack. She smiled as their eyes met. For an instant, Taylor wished he could stay, then decided not: better to have the woman's good opinion. "You serve a fine man," he whispered, as the parson babbled on. Winifred nodded.

Taylor began to tighten straps, then paused to fish out a book.

"Thank you, Master Taylor," said the parson as, pedlar once more, his guest stood upon the threshold. Taylor tried to wave emotion away. "It ... it was your doing, and not a real hare ...?"

Taylor indicated the stained cloth Winifred had bound his left arm, still damp from a healing salve. "Something was real. This was real. Your heroism as you stabbed a hard man was real."

It was Winifred who looked pleased at the praise.

Taylor handed over the book in his hand to the parson, whose tubby face creased as he received it. Taylor caught the joke. "This doesn't have your name in it, or with it, but it is yours anyway." Nabbes flicked through the pages. "I wish I had something to give you," he said awkwardly. Taylor made a mock bow, courtly and flourishing.

"Give me your good opinion, Sir Priest." The tension was broken between them. Taylor turned and began to walk away, firmly, decisively.

"You are a bad poet, but a good man, Master Taylor," called Nabbes after him.

Taylor grinned as he increased his pace. The priest was wrong on both counts, but then, men of the cloth need their illusions.

Andy Sawyer lives in Neston on the Wirral with a wife, two daughters and the obligatory cat, and works as a librarian. He edits *Paperback Inferno*, the internal review magazine of the BSFA, and also contributes to its critical journal, *Vector*. Articles/reviews have appeared in *Foundation*, *GMI*, *Skeleton Crew*, *Million* and elsewhere. Fiction has been published in the anthology *Digital Dreams* (NEL) as well as *The Gate*, *Auguries*, *All Hallows*, *Works* and other small-press magazines. He is currently investigating how and why Taylor left the playhouses of Kaerlud, and his relationship with My Lord Witchfinder.



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TERRAFORMING

By Ronald Brocklehurst

TERRAFORMING ...

What do terraforming and male modelling have in common? Nothing of course, except perhaps one chilly Summer morning last year when *Time/Life*, who wanted a shot of me for their book *Starbound*, had me prancing around Crystal Palace park to the directions of a photographer. I've always wondered how professional photographers get their subjects to look natural; the answer is to make them talk about their pet subject.

"Tell me about terraforming," he said.

"It's difficult to know where to start," I replied, squeamishly eyeing his camera.

"Total Recall."

Now that got me well started!

Remember the ending of that film? Our SMG-toting hero Arnie Schwarzenegger single handedly terraforms Mars in a mere five minutes. Now that's something! Something so absurd in fact that the effect on the audience I was sitting with was to provoke guffaws of laughter, rather than gasps of awe.

... THE GOOD

I am more prone now to sigh and shake my head. Terraforming is an awesome concept, that of modifying the environment of a dead planet so that it can support life, and ultimately, shirt-sleeved human beings. A concept of Promethian grandeur dreamt up by the pioneers of science fiction and which has received intermittent serious scientific scrutiny since 1961. However, whilst speculations concerning the engineering of worlds have stagnated within the pages of SF, a new surge of interest from professional scientists is taking the subject into new areas. After a long absence, papers on terraforming are starting to reappear in the technical journals. The December 1989 issue of *The Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*, edited by myself, was the first ever such learned publication devoted entirely to the subject. A follow-up issue appeared in April 1991 and a third is planned for August 1992. JBIS however has always been known for sticking its neck out - a bigger break through however has just happened, for **Chris McKay** and colleagues from the **NASA-Ames Research Center** have succeeded in getting a fat paper on terraforming Mars published in the 8/8/91 issue of the prestigious journal *Nature*. Now that's a whole lot of 'street cred' in the scientific world - check it out.

Terraforming in science fiction has often been there for the purposes of providing a futuristic backdrop to the plot. However, a backdrop with no thought put into it has the appearance of a rather tacky stage set, lowering the tone of the whole story. (This is unless the characters and the plot are equally tacky, in which case who gives a damn anyway?) Anyway, what do I mean by "putting some thought into it"? Namely that any author should make at least some attempt to do a few BOEC's (back-of-envelope-calculations) and/or provide some atmosphere to suspend the reader's disbelief and to avoid insulting their intelligence.

One of the greatest fictional treatments of terraforming to date is one of the earliest, that written by **Olaf Stapledon** in his future history *Last and First Men*. The fact that the visionary qualities of this masterwork, published in 1930, have not diminished is amazing in itself. However, the most staggering section for me is the twelve pages where he describes a vast project to make Venus habitable. Not only did Stapledon include technical details of his scheme, which were feasible in the light of

the then very scant knowledge of Venus, but he also wove a powerful ethical dilemma into the story. Here, he was almost sixty years ahead of his time: the first ever papers considering the ethical implications of terraforming have appeared only in the past few years. Binding this all together is the marvellous atmosphere of Stapledon's writing which maintains the impetus of a future historical drama where the actors are eighteen successively evolved human races playing on a temporal stage of two billion years.

The word terraforming was coined by the author **Jack Williamson** in his novels *Seetee Ship* and *Seetee Shock* which were first published in short story form under the pseudonym of Will Stewart in the 1940's. However the next great terraforming landmark in SF was the novel *Farmer in the Sky* by **Robert Heinlein**. Written in 1950, it deals with near-future civilization making a home out of the Jovian satellite Ganymede. The book still reads well today, and although modern planetological knowledge undermines some of the bases for his proposals, the reader is never bored or patronised. It was a landmark for four reasons: a) terraforming is the central theme of the entire novel; b) the subject is made more approachable by intertwining it with an individual human story; c) in Chapter 12 the author actually presents his BOECs and d) the importance of ecological expertise in the aftermath of planetary engineering was stressed years before ecology became a fashionable science. All in all it's quite an impressive package: VGSF have recently reprinted *Farmer in the Sky* in paperback, so why not give it a go?

Since those early days, terraforming has now become a standard part of the science fiction writer's kit of parts which to construct a future with a good WOW! potential. Some have done the subject justice, some have been dire. I certainly cannot list them all, I certainly haven't read them all. Generally speaking however, SF is no longer the forum where fresh ideas on the subject are aired. Maybe though this is as it should be. SF authors introduced the idea and it's now taken seriously enough for the scientists to take over whilst keeping their academic reputations intact. This is not to say that science fiction no longer has anything to offer - the best modern SF novel I have read where the terraforming of Mars is used as a theme is **Kim Stanley Robinson's** *Icchenge*. Although short on technical details, the feeling of a planet gradually awakening to life over a period of several centuries is skillfully woven into the plot. Robinson's treatment of the subject is more than just a collection of high-buzz words; he somehow manages to get the reader to care about that cold and dusty planet by subtly stirring those emotions most involved in creativity. He made of terraforming a work of art - possibly without meaning to do so.

... THE BAD

Scientific errors in SF novels are at best beneficial, and essential to the plot and at worst harmless. However, popular science authors - often SF writers having a go at writing "science fact" - can do a lot of damage. It is the popular science authors who are mainly responsible for educating the public concerning new developments in science. Since most readers are uncritical, the bulk of what appears under the name of popular science tends to be believed, the fact that it could be rubbish is immaterial. Particularly attractive rubbish gives rise to the scientific myth. These are

false tales, widely believed to be true that develop a momentum and an ability to grow and travel both time and space; the famous anecdote of the exploding poodle in the microwave is one example. The terraforming of Venus has a particularly hardy scientific myth attached to it that survives to this day.

In 1988, the B.I.S. forwarded me this letter sent to them by a member of the public, so that I could reply on their behalf.

Sir,

As early as 1961 an idea was put forward by **Carl Sagan** involving sending unmanned spacecraft into Venus's orbit carrying on board colonies of blue-green algae in small torpedo-like rockets. The purpose was to introduce these organisms into the Venusian environment for the purpose of breaking down the carbon dioxide atmosphere.

Within a year, the surface of Venus would be partly visible to telescopes on Earth. As oxygen replaces carbon dioxide the Sun's infra-red radiation, hitherto trapped, will escape into space and the temperature of the lower atmosphere will decrease considerably. Water will collect from the atmosphere's vapour as rain that will eventually reach the planet's surface.

The new oxygen atmosphere will combine with sunlight to create, high in the stratosphere, a layer of ozone. Sagan's entire scheme, requiring no greater expenditure than that involved in a dozen or so spacecraft and a few thousand small algae rockets, would bring the staggering riches of a second world in our possession.

My question is if it were possible to send *Venera 9* and *10* in October 1975 into Venus's atmosphere and land, why has the scheme put forward by Sagan long ago not been attempted?

This letter sums up what has become the "standard scenario" for terraforming Venus and the writer's question at the end is well put. Why indeed? A whole new world, close to the size of the Earth for the cost of a few rocket nose-cones full of the green slime - it seems irresistible! The answer, of course, is that the whole scheme is complete bunk - it is a modern scientific myth that refuses to die. I still get approached by people at the various functions where I am invited to speak on terraforming who ask the same, or very similar, questions.

How did this myth start, how was it nurtured until that current point when it became self-sustaining?

Although terraforming had been around in SF for many years, **Carl Sagan** in 1961 was the first scientist to address its feasibility in print. In a speculative tailpiece to a paper on Venus, published in *Science*, he suggested that the composition of the Venusian atmosphere might be modified by the action of photosynthetic micro-organisms. At the time however, the atmosphere of Venus was thought to be much thinner than we now know it to be. When applied to his model of Venus, Sagan's scheme did indeed seem to offer a simple, cheap and potentially feasible method of substantially improving the Venusian environment.

However, since the late sixties, it has become important how truly hostile the planet is (see Table 1). Venus has a surface atmos-

pheric pressure ninety times that of the Earth (about 90 bars), a surface temperature hot enough to melt lead and clouds made of sulphuric acid. Sagan's scenario applied to this world will not work. Why not? Well, it's simple really - all you have to do is to calculate the partial pressure of oxygen produced after complete processing of the atmosphere. Remember, we are simply replacing, on a molecule by molecule basis, Venusian carbon dioxide with oxygen. It's an elementary BOEC: 90 bars x the molecular weight of oxygen/the molecular weight of carbon dioxide; 90 bars x 32/44 = 65.5 bars. This is roughly 300 times the amount in the Earth's atmosphere, and 100 times the pressure that is toxic to breathe. Such an enormous oxygen excess would be highly reactive, anything remotely combustible would explode into flames at the merest spark! Venus would be transformed, assuming the process could go to completion (which is doubtful), from one totally uninhabitable state to another.

What effect did this new knowledge have on popular science authors? None whatsoever! Sagan's original idea had generated such euphoria that nobody was going to let any new data dampen their enthusiasm. Two books published in the seventies are the most responsible for taking the Sagan scenario and casting it in stone. The mythmakers were **Adrian Berry**, science correspondent of *The Daily Telegraph* who wrote *The Next Ten Thousand Years* and **Jerry Pournelle**, NASA engineer and SF author who published an anthology of popular science articles under the title of *A Step Farther Out*. Both of them took Sagan's original proposal literally and applied it to the modern Venus in glowing prose. Swept away by enthusiasm, both authors provided no clue that they had considered Venus's changed circumstances and no sign of any attempt to check the feasibility of what they were proposing. I read Barry's book when I was sixteen and thought it was brilliant. It was well written and introduced a host of futuristic ideas I had never come across

before. However, despite being an A-level science student, it only occurred to me years afterwards to check the author's assumptions and calculations. After all, this was "science fact" something that the uncritical young reader tends to accept without argument.

Both authors took the scenario to extremes that Sagan hadn't done even with his far less hostile model of Venus fifteen years before. Berry claimed that with a year the algae would have had such a dramatic effect on the atmosphere as to create breaks in the Venusian cloud deck through which the surface would be visible. This is despite the fact that it is easy to calculate that 100 percent efficient algae, utilizing 100 percent of the sunlight reaching Venus (the most optimistic assumption possible) would take a minimum of 5000 years to process the atmosphere. In reality it would take far longer. Pournelle's claims were even more ambitious. He reckoned we could get the job done this century for the cost of a "medium sized war." Within his lifetime he claimed it was entirely possible that he could be sitting in a city on Venus, "Venusburg" he called it, writing a follow-up to his article. Actually Jerry did write a follow-up of sorts to his article but on Earth, not on Venus. It took the form of three sentences tacked onto the end of the Venus terraforming section in the 1979 edition of his book. It's a vague addition in which he states that the task "appears to be more difficult than I knew." Possibly the Chapter itself should not have been scrapped as one is left so gobsmacked by the end of it that it is easy to overlook the tailpiece and impossible to ascertain exactly what Pournelle means by "more difficult."

With this kind of overkill, it's not surprising that a myth was created. People love good news and there is something about the human race playing God that is of compelling fascination.

... AND THE NEW

Let me get this straight - I'm not saying that terraforming is impossible, only that many of

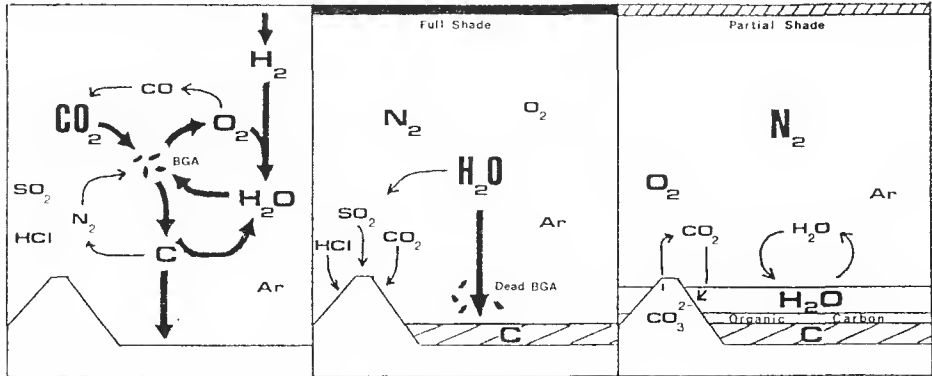
the ideas that emerged out of the euphoria of the sixties are now being shown to be over-optimistic. A truly creative approach to the problem involves dumping the old ideas, or at least modifying them. For instance, photo-synthetic processing of the Venusian atmosphere would work much better if hydrogen was imported to Venus to soak up the oxygen, producing water - the stuff of future oceans (see Figure 1). This would be done gradually, mopping up the O₂ as it is produced by the algae. Eventually the carbon dioxide atmosphere of Venus would be converted into a steam atmosphere. However, the greenhouse effect of water is even stronger than that of carbon dioxide and so the new atmosphere would not spontaneously rain out to form oceans - the surface would still be too hot. Rainout would have to be induced by shading Venus behind an occultation disc, like a giant solar sail, built and stabilized in space. In a couple of centuries, the planet would cool sufficiently for a hydrosphere to form, leaving behind a thinner Earthlike nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere.

So, terraforming Venus is feasible in principle, but would be a vastly greater undertaking than a "medium sized" 20th century war. The need to mine about 4 x 10⁶ tons of hydrogen, possibly from the giant planets, would increase the price tag by many orders of magnitude. Only a solar system-wide civilisation with access to a spare hundred thousand trillion watts of power would be up to such a Stapledonian task. Funnily enough, I find this vision far more exciting than Berry and Pournelle's "free lunch" scenario.

A Step Farther Out was reprinted recently and, of course, we've had *Total Recall*. This is all old hat. There are many new ideas beginning to surface. Check out the December '89 and April '91 issues of *JBIS* and prepare to be amazed. Keep an eye on the science fact columns of *Analog* and look out for the McKay paper out recently in *Nature*. You'll find this is one area where the science is a whole lot more exciting than the fiction.

Venus - Terraforming Requirements

| Parameter | Present Value | Modification required |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Surface Gravity | 0.89g | Unnecessay |
| Solar day | 117 days | Substantial reduction |
| Axial inclination | 2° | Unnecessay |
| Albedo | 0.7 | Keep high |
| Mean surface temperature | 735K | 440K decrease |
| Surface atmospheric pressure | 92 bars | 90 bars reduction |
| CO ₂ partial pressutre | 90 bars | Remove nearly all |
| O ₂ partial pressure | v. low | Create 0.1 - 0.5 bars |
| N ₂ partial pressure | 2 bars | 1 bar optional reduction |
| H ₂ O partial pressure | v. low | Create 20 - 100 bars (for oceans) |
| Insulation | 2643 Wm ⁻² | Reduce 25 - 50% |



MISS AIN'T BEHAVING

By Jack Wainer

The company was good, the beer was real, and the music was out of this world. The Wreake Valley Stompers were on top form, we'd never sounded better. Ken's trumpet was really biting, and Gerry's clarinet had a hard Johnny Dodds edge to it. Even Paddy, after a couple of pints, was producing some fine running glides on his trombone; Kid Ory eat your heart out.

We'd played plenty of local pubs in the Nottingham area, but this was our first outing into the wilds of the Black Country. This was it, the Wolverhampton gig. Decent pub too, once we'd managed to track it down. Of course, they drank mild instead of bitter, but you have to make allowances when you go into foreign parts.

Some Hot Five and Hot Seven numbers had got the audience going. We'd started with Muskrat Ramble, followed up with Struttin With Some Barbecue, then hit them with West End Blues. That had them up and cheering. Ken was definitely blowing a dirty tone tonight.

From my position in the rhythm section I glanced round at the audience. Quite a mixed crowd. Nice to see a fair number of youngsters of both sexes and all races. A good number of middle-aged patrons too, polo-neck jumpers marking out fans who'd got the jazz bug in the first revival back in the early fifties.

Four young blokes at the bar were dressed in suits, and looked a bit out of place. Still, they were pretending to enjoy the music, even if their feet did tap on the wrong beat. Sean on the banjo saw me looking and leaned over.

"Trainee accountants," he chuckled, "or maybe estate agents."

"Yeah, hard men," chipped in Billy from behind his drums. He went into a short solo break, always a crowd pleaser.

After a slow bluesy number came my favourite spot of the evening where Ken swapped his trumpet for a cornet. He stuck a mute in, and we played Riverboat Shuffle and Relaxin At The Touro. Real Muggsy Spanier sound he had, absolutely spot on.

We had a breather then, and the pub owner brought another tray of pints over.

It was then She came in. A woman in her twenties, perhaps. Or possibly thirties. I couldn't help noticing her, she was dressed to be noticed. Glitter and razzmatazz wasn't in it. Gold dress, bright red hair and crimson lipstick. Sequins everywhere. Completely over the top but not bad looking. She moved very gracefully too, despite being extremely tall. She didn't hide her height, she walked fluently and confidently over to the band.

"I'm Sandy," she said in a lovely contralto voice.

"So am I, petal," said Paddy wagging his ginger beard. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Thank you, kind sir," she said. "I'll have a Screwdriver."

Paddy, who'd obviously been thinking

more in terms of half a pint, went to the bar.

Billy decided to try his luck. "He's not the driver, darling. I am."

What is it with drummers?

"You're wicked," laughed Sandy, patting his hand.

I looked at her long fingers covered in rings, and a thought came into my mind and spluttered. She did have very large hands. I looked up, made eye contact with Sandy, and she winked at me.

"Take nothing for granted," she said. "Life's full of little surprises. Now let's see if our hairy friend has managed to buy my drinkie, the pet."

She sauntered over to the bar with the easy grace I'd noticed earlier.

"She's a character and a half," said Gerry.

"He," I said.

"Sorry?" he queried.

"He's a character and a half," I said.

"Oh shit!" said Billy.

What is it with drummers?

Paddy came back from the bar, a cheerful grin on his face.

"Forget it Paddy," said Billy, "you haven't caught on yet, have you? That Sandy ..."

Paddy interrupted.

"He's a bloke, you know. In drag. Very good, isn't he. Sure fooled a lot of people at the bar."

We turned and looked. The yuppy quartet didn't look too pleased at being fooled by Sandy's appearance. The loudest of the four was proving his macho credentials by raising his voice.

"It's a bloody transvestite," he protested. "A damn fairy."

Sandy patted his face and moved away.

"Time to play, I reckon," I said.

We picked up the instruments and went into a rousing version of Momma Don't Allow, Paddy doing the vocals. This gave us the chance to do a solo each, even me on the string bass. Ken, Gerry and Paddy did fine breaks and Billy went mad on his drum solo as usual. Too much R and B style for me; I reckon that lad will end up in a rock band. Give me Baby Dodds or Zutty Singleton every time.

After Jada, Gerry did a clarinet spot on When You And I Were Young, Maggie, like Monty Sunshine used to do. Billy and me did the backing. I noticed Sandy sashay over to the stage and whisper something to Ken and Paddy.

I guessed what was happening, and my heart sank. About one gig in three, some punter wants to sit in with the band. I blame that old film, Genevieve, where Kay Kendall borrows the trumpet and plays along. Trouble is, none of the people who want to sit in can play. Kay Kendall, they ain't. Besides, none of us want some half-pissed amateur messing about with the instruments. And the drunker they are, the more they want to play drums or bass.

Ken looked at me and shrugged his shoul-

ders. Paddy was reluctantly nodding; it looked as though he was agreeing. Ken mouthed, "He sings," at me. Not quite so bad then, at least he couldn't wreck anything valuable.

Might be embarrassing, of course, if he couldn't sing. Still, it'd be a laugh. And since we never use mikes at a pub gig, we could always drown him out by playing louder.

The four trainee estate agents had spotted what was going on.

"Hey look at this. The poofter's going to sing. Watch your arses, boys."

Paddy walked over to their table and had a quiet word. Knowing him, it probably referred to the removal of an eyeball or a testicle. They certainly backed down, and sat gritting their teeth. The rest of the pub applauded, though I wasn't sure if it was for Paddy's action or for Sandy's debut on stage.

Sandy said something to Gerry; he grinned through his ginger whiskers and picked up his clarinet.

He played the opening bars of Clarinet Man, and Sandy began to sing:

"I know a fine clarinet man

He came from way down South."

It was the most perfect Bessie Smith imitation I have ever heard. The deep compelling voice, the bluesy phrasing, the beautiful mastery of the music were all there.

"He blows just as loud as he can

When that clarinet's in his mouth."

I looked at Billy and Sean, and we moved off the stage. Ken and Gerry followed, and we stood and stared.

"He wails and groans, he soars and moans."

Somewhere behind the singer, Paddy was playing better than I'd ever heard him. I couldn't see him though, the only thing I could see in the whole place was the singer. Everything was in darkness except the big bronze-coloured woman on the stage. She was tall and statuesque, just this side of voluptuousness, buxom and massive but stately too. She was as shapely as an hour-glass, with a high-voltage magnet for a personality.

This was not an English drag-artist doing a good Bessie Smith impression. This was Bessie Smith.

"Oh Sammy, blow that thing, that liquorish stick,

Make it talk, make it sing.

Lordie how did you get so slick?"

The stern features broke into a smile, great dimples creasing her cheeks, the tough face just dripping good looks.

"If Jesus heard you play, oh my,

He'd let you lead his band on high."

Her way of moulding the syllables, the inflexion of the powerful voice, lifted the banal words into something sensuous and earthy, something of monumental simplicity.

"Oh Sammy, make it sing, that fine black stick,

You'd even make a lame man rise and dance real quick."

She was an actress, a comedienne, she moved like a dancer.

A voice from somewhere behind me shouted, "Hear that big black bitch."

Bessie turned and stood massive and defiant. She didn't give an inch. "Kiss my ass," she boomed and raised a huge fist towards the heckler. She sang on, unconcerned.

"He would dance all day, I say, doing the Eagle while you play. Oh Sammy, play that thing, I mean that clarinet."

The audience exploded into cheers, applause and stamping approval. Bessie moved back into the darkness without acknowledging it.

When she re-emerged, the noise petered out. This was a different woman. She was slighter in build, lighter in skin. She was elegant and attractive, with fine features, carefully drawn eyebrows over soulful eyes.

From the darkness came the sound of a piano. I ought to have found this odd, since we never used one. I just took it for granted though. She began to sing with slow cool intensity.

"If you go down to the ..."

I shivered, realising what she was about to sing.

**"... gallant South,
Avert your eyes and shut your mouth.
Don't see the fine folk dressed in white,
Making sport in the pale moonlight."**

She looked young and vulnerable as she stood there, her sad sweet voice understating the cruelty of the words.

**"Don't see the body swinging there,
Above your head in the scented air."**

As she sang of the scented air in the gallant south, I noticed she was wearing a white gardenia in her hair.

**"Don't see his burnt and twisted limbs
Just see gentlefolk singing hymns.
Don't see the crows as they find their meat
On tortured flesh and charred black feet."**

Oh Billie, don't let them hurt you, I thought. If anyone heckles you now my mind will erupt. Tell them the truth, Lady Day.

**"Just close the book or turn the ...
pa.a.ge."**

She held on to the word **page**, twisting and torturing it into a strange new shape. She pounced onto the last line, her voice angry and strong for the first time.

"Don't heed the fruit of the lynch mob's ..."

She made the listeners wait a punishing five seconds, before delivering the final word.

"... rage."

The audience shifted about uncomfortably, unsure whether to clap or weep.

Then suddenly Billie Holiday had gone and an incredible figure leapt out into the light.

Her short stout body supported a face that managed to be both congenial and ugly at the same time. She was dressed in a frilly black gown, a necklace of gold coins and a headband of glittering beads. She carried a frothy fan of eagle feathers, and

her fingers were covered in jewelled rings.

Her vividly painted lips split into a lovely wide smile, revealing a generous mouth full of gold teeth.

A deep rich voice roared out, "Come on, my honeys, let's give them Chain Gang Blues."

We didn't hesitate; if Ma Rainey needed us, we were her band. We leapt up onto the shadowy stage and leaned in towards the lighted area where the mother of the blues stood, ugly and attractive.

We played a short intro and she began.

"Let me tell you about my heavy load,"

Ma's voice was even more lowdown and moaning than Bessie's had been. Her deep rich tone went from softly moaning to a glorious roaring shout.

**"I work all day on the chain gang county road ...
Ninety days to Labour, Labour, toil and sweat,**

I've done two hundred and I ain't done my time yet."

Behind Ma's impressive and imposing singing, we played our heart, out. Under her generous rich contralto, the melancholy could be discerned.

"Many days of sorrow, many nights of woe.

And a ball and chain everywhere I go."

She finished and raised her arms in tribute to the wildly cheering audience. She thanked us warmly, called us her Georgia Honeybabes, and laughed her roaring generous guffaw.

And then ...

... the lights were back on and Sandy was there, posing and pirouetting, exhorting the audience to louder applause. He leapt off the stage, to continue his routine of teasing and flirting, while we pulled ourselves together and played High Society and St Louis Blues.

The rest of the evening was a bit of a blur, partly due to the intake of beer, but also because I couldn't sort out whether Sandy had just been a bloody good impressionist. Or maybe a mass hypnotist. But I was still convinced I'd seen Bessie, Lady Day and Ma Rainey in the flesh.

While we played on, Sandy circulated. After his spot with the band, he could do no wrong. He moved from table to table, group to group, with delight at his evident popularity. Each group he approached welcomed him with ready friendship. Everyone wanted to shake his hand and congratulate him.

Except the young accountants of course. At first, they were openly hostile. Then their loud taunts about AIDS carriers petered out as they realised that no-one else in the pub was with them.

And the band played on. I know we played St James Infirmary and the Bix number, Singing The Blues. I remember the inevitable Saints at the end of the evening, and

then all the punters had left and the pub was empty.

Sandy came over before he left and gave everyone a hug. He thanked us for a great evening.

"No, we're the ones saying thanks, Sandy," said Paddy and we all chorused our agreement. At the door, Sandy gave a flamboyant wave and was gone.

The publican brought us another pint apiece and our wages. He seemed to be in no hurry to close up, so we jammed a slow blues number to unwind, then sat around nattering for half an hour.

On our way back across the car park to pack the instruments in the van, we found him. He was lying on the wet ground, among the greasy chip papers and half-empty polystyrene food containers.

His face was bruised and swollen almost out of recognition, one eye a mass of coagulating blood. His nose was obviously broken, and a heel print was visible on his lower face. Many of his teeth were snapped off. It looked as though they had stamped on his hands too; they were twisted and black.

Billy and Sean ran back into the pub to use the phone, while Ken knelt down and felt for a pulse. Gerry and Paddy watched. Sandy's mutilated body twitched, and his one good eye tried to open.

"Oh Christ," he murmured through his split lips, "don't look at me." He coughed and blood ran onto his dress. "I'm a mess."

I turned away and threw up.

Two and a half hours later, we were heading north-east up the M42. It was a very silent journey, none of the usual dirty jokes or singing. Ten minutes passed. I looked at Paddy and he was crying.

"Hey up, Paddy. They said he'd live, you know. He's a survivor."

"Stop the friggin' van," Ken yelled.

Gerry pulled up; we were in the deserted main street of some market town. Ken opened the door and got out, his cornet in his hand. Paddy followed him.

Ken put the cornet to his mouth and blew. Not a tune, but loud screaming note after note. Paddy threw back his head and yelled obscenities at the sky.

The rest of us got out and went over to them. I put my arm round Paddy's shoulders. "Come on, man," I said. "Let's play something for Sandy."

We got the instruments out of the van, and in the middle of that sleeping country town we played and sang Didn't he Ramble. It's an old New Orleans funeral march. It seemed fitting somehow. I know Sandy hadn't died but I felt that something had.

"Didn't he ramble, didn't he ramble,

He rambled all around, in and out of town.

He rambled till the butcher cut him down."

We didn't play it particularly well; we were too numb to do it justice, but at least it was rugged and loud.

Jack Wainer has been described as an ageing long-haired dwarf. His stories have been published in the Pan Horror Series, *Fear*, *Skeleton Crew*, *Dream SF*, *Mayfair(!)*, *Short Stories Magazine*, *Peeping Tom*, *Rattler's Tale* and *Short Story International*. Stories have been broadcast on Radio Trent, Leicester Sound, GEM-AM and BBC Radio Leicester. His politics are red and his eyes are blue. He was born in 1939 in NE Leicestershire.





Price Of A HEAD

By Roger B Pyle

The mirror had been valuable, a gold one, and now it glimmered softly as it sank turning through the murky green water, finally coming to rest with its face up so that the thief could see his reflection staring back at him from the bottom of the fault.

Yesterday, thirty miles from the city of Zenoa, he had come to the place where the river Went divided, one of its forks winding away through the foothills to the sea, the other rusing on until it plunged from the edge of a sheer cliff into dense forest below. It was by the foot of this cataract that he had spent the night; and now, as he shaved at a fault in the rock a little way from the main pool and out of the spray of the fall, he had dropped the mirror.

He swore softly as he inspected the fault. It was deep, could swallow a tall man quite easily, and was too narrow to risk lowering himself in. He made one or two futile attempts to hook the mirror out with a length of stick; but in the end, nervous in case he slipped on the wet rocks and fell headlong, he was forced to abandon it. Returning to his horse which he had left cropping the tender grass by the edge of the pool, he saddled it and rode on down the track into the green gold forest.

He was a Lenoran, and a thief by trade. The name he had been given at birth was Raoul Nathan-tor. He was known by other names in as many other places, but not all of those names were as flattering as he would have wished nor the places any he would visit again soon, so he would not have bored a stranger with an account of either; it was enough to say that he was a traveller by habit, and sometimes of necessity.

It was for the latter reason that he'd fled Zenoa under cover of darkness two nights before, with only the mirror - an expensive trinket snatched at the last moment from the dressing-table of Lonia, the Emperor's wife - to show for his endeavours there over the past few months.

Now he had lost the mirror and was as penniless as he had been upon first entering the city gates.

But there had been luxury for a while ...

He allowed himself a slow smile as he remembered: luxury, and the copper-skinned Lonia, young wife of an aging monarch.

He was this way deep in thought as he travelled through the green depths of the forest, and it was for that reason that he did not notice the dwarf until he was almost on top of him.

Grotesquely small even for a dwarf, he was probably less than three fore-arms in height and affected a beard that hung in five plaited lengths almost to his feet. On the ground beside him was a sack. From its bulky appearance, the thief guessed that the sack was filled with logs or vegetables - although the dwarf was obviously no farmer if the sword slung across his back, hilt slanting above his left shoulder, was an accurate guide to his occupation. Nor was the black gelding tethered nearby close to the path, either resting or waiting for someone. He looked up at the thief as he approached, and when he drew level, spoke: "Sir," he said, "you have a remarkably fine head!"

Raoul found himself liking the dwarf, despite his repulsive appearance, and invited the little man to ride with him. The dwarf readily agreed and the two travelled on through the forest side by side. Several times as they rode Raoul glanced around to find the dwarf studying him intently. At another time he might have found the attention flattering, and easily understandable, but there was something about the dwarf's manner which reminded him uncomfortably of a connoisseur studying a rare item - assessing its market value. The thief found this disquieting, although he could not have said why, and by the time that they had covered another mile it began to get on his nerves. He tried to strike up a conversation.

"When I met you," he said, "you remarked on the fineness of my head, and over this past mile it seems to have captured your whole attention. I feel I must point out that, however fine my head, it is much like any other. Why then does it intrigue you?"

The dwarf cracked a smile full of ragged green teeth. "Forgive me; I wasn't aware that I was staring. It's just that I'm something of an artist," he said, "or at least I like to think of myself as such. Perhaps my own, alas, stunted form -" He spread his arms and looked down at himself sadly -



"perhaps this has heightened my sensitivity to human physiognomy. The human head I find especially fascinating."

"One should always treat one's head with respect," Raoul agreed, convinced now that he was humouring an eccentric.

The dwarf nodded. "This brow for instance." There was a whisper of steel against silk as he drew a gleaming dagger from his sash, and then, leaning from his horse, touched its needle point to Raoul's face. "Had you a mirror, you would be able to note its impressive height, the manner which it slopes gently from the hairline, then curves, as if moulded by an artist, before falling precipitately to the cheekbones with the smooth grace of a waterfall."

Raoul murmured a regret that he had lost his mirror only that morning.

"And the eyebrows," continued the dwarf. "You would see how they streak like jagged lightning flashes to meet like an arrowhead above your nose."

The dwarf continued this way for some considerable time, which Raoul might have found only embarrassing had it not been for the little man's habit of emphasising each point he made with quick little flourishes of the dagger. And any pleasure which he might have derived from the flattery was quite dispelled by the dwarf's next remark, which struck him as being in dubious taste.

"Some would pay a very high sum of money to possess such an exceptionally

fine head," he said.

Only from politeness, because the journey had begun to make him strained and nervous, Raoul agreed. It was true that he had heard of some races, like the wealthy but barbaric Darkhoors of the south, who valued such items of human anatomy and displayed them as ornaments in crystal side-cases; while other preferred suitably dried and hollowed out heads, with the upper cranium sliced cleanly away to form a lidded pot for the storing of sweetmeats or herbs.

Raoul said: "A pity that these practises render the head useless to its original owner."

"True, true," said the dwarf. "And for that reason it's with all the more regret that I must deprive you of your own."

The dwarf reigned in his horse slightly ahead of Raoul, blocking the path; he drew his sword from behind him. "I notice that you carry no weapon of your own. Again a pity." He patted his flabby stomach. "I'm in need of the exercise. Still, needs must -"

There was something almost comical about this tiny, malformed creature wielding the huge sword. The next instant the blade swung in a silver arc and struck chips from the tree beside Raoul in a blow that would have sent his head flying from his shoulders if he had not leaned back. He backed his horse away, prepared to duck behind the animal when the dwarf swung again. "A bargain!" he cried.

"No bargains!" The sword arced again. Raoul ducked and his horse sank coughing beneath him, its neck half severed. Before he could roll clear he was trapped beneath the animal's flank.

"Hold back your sword! I'll show you something worth a hundred times more than the price of a head!"

The dwarf had dismounted and was standing, legs splayed, on the horse's carcass. The sword shone silver green above his head. "How much did you say? A hundred times? I don't believe you."

"A thousand! Something beyond price!"

The dwarf's eyes narrowed greedily. Reluctantly he lowered the sword to his side. "Show me," he said.

Raoul walked back along the forest trail with the dwarf following close behind on horseback. Every now and again there was a faint hiss as the dwarf swung the sword playfully through the undergrowth, lopping off ferns and thin boughs. Each time the sword hissed, Raoul tensed, expecting to feel the bite of steel in his neck. At last they came to the pool at the foot of the cataract, and he led the little man across the damp grass to the fault in the rock where he'd shaved that morning and lost the golden mirror. "There." He pointed into the water.

The dwarf dismounted and crept suspiciously up to the fault, glancing warily at the thief. "Well, where is this fabulous treas-

ure? I don't see anything."

"There is no treasure," Raoul said. "This—" he pointed dramatically down at the fault, "—is the secret oracle of that ancient and most revered monarch of Petruvia, Underwent the Thirtieth."

"I never heard of any Underwent, Thirtieth or otherwise," the dwarf growled.

"Few people have; that's why the oracle's a secret," Raoul said, silently praying. "If you look down into the oracle you will see your destiny revealed: is that not worth the price of a thousand heads?"

"If this is a trick..." The dwarf spat on the blade suggestively.

"No trick," Raoul said. He moved a few steps away. "Look, I'll stand right over here. In any case, I am, as you have already observed, unarmed."

Muttering, the dwarf approached the fault and leaned over the edge, peering down into the water. Then he tensed with excitement. "I can see it! The spirit of the oracle! It is a strange and hideous face that stares up at me from the depths, and it seems to speak, though I can hear no voice. What does this mean?"

"Look closer. All will be revealed."

As the dwarf leaned still lower over the water, Raoul crept up silently behind him. At the last moment the dwarf seemed to sense his danger and began to turn and rise, reaching for the sword on the grass behind him. But it was too late; Raoul was upon him. The terrible little man hadn't even time to cry out as the thief gripped him quickly around the ankles and tipped him

headlong into the fault. The dwarf's legs thrashed furiously as his short squat body stuck upside down between the sides; then he was gone. For a time bubbles rose to the surface. Then the water was still.

Raoul set his shoulder against a large boulder close by, and rolled it neatly over the fault, sealing it like a jar. Then, shaking a little, he walked a little way off and sat down cross-legged on the damp grass to regain his composure. The black gelding was standing nearby, the heavy sack still hanging from its saddle. After a while he got up and went over to the horse. He did not open the sack yet; there was no need.

He set to work to dig. When he judge the hole deep enough, he opened the sack and spilled its contents in the long grass. Beautifully embalmed, eyes stitched closed with black waxed thread and tender care, the faces only had their beauty in common.

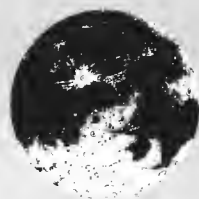
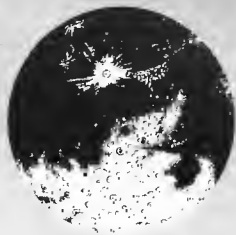
He buried them deep.

He marked the place with a cairn of thirteen stones, one for each of the headhunter's victims. When he was done he mounted the gelding and continued his journey through the waiting evening forest. He reflected that everything in life had a price, but the price of a head was dear.

Roger Pyle once ran a postal writers' workshop for the BSFA, which included Robert Holdstock, David Wingrove and Chris Morgan among its members. His first story was accepted on its first submission for the Fontana Great Horror series, and was reprinted later in a hardback collection. He then ran off to Germany to work aboard a tourist ship on the Rhine, and subsequently disappeared for several years, reappearing only recently with his girlfriend Asha and cat Velvet. The former has now persuaded him to return to writing. "The Price of a Head", his second published story, is part of a much longer work in progress.



St J TWENTIETH-CENTURY SCIENCE-FICTION WRITERS THIRD EDITION



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Twentieth-Century Science Fiction Writers, Paul Schellinger, Noelle Watson, editors; 1992; 276x219; c1000pp; £80.00; ISBN: 1-55862-111-3

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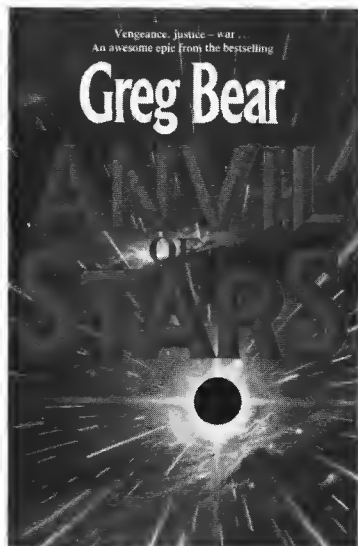


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BOOK REVIEWS

In each issue of FAR POINT we'll be having a closer look at some of the new or forthcoming SF and Fantasy releases. This month 'Anvil of Stars, Vampire Tapestry, a review of Twentieth Century Writers and Moorcock's Warlord of Mars' are reviewed,



Anvil Of Stars
 Author: Greg Bear
 Publisher: Century
 (Legend)
 Price: £8.99
 ISBN 0-7126-3890-3
 Paperback

"At the end of *The Forge of God*, the Earth is dead, murdered by self-replicating spacefaring machines. A few thousand humans have been saved in the Central Ark by other robots, sent by the Benefactors to defend primitive worlds from these planet-killing probes. The Law demands that civilisations which make such machines must be punished - with extinction. Humans must carry out this punishment with the help of the Benefactors. Younger occupants of the Central Ark volunteer, and their journey begins. This is how the balance is kept."

By the use of this extremely condensed prologue, Bear saves us from the info-dump nightmare that normally plagues sequels to successful novels. As a result we are plunged straight into the action, with the young crew of the "Dawn Treader" en route at high sub-light speeds towards target stars that may be the home systems of the alien civilisation responsible - through its robotic agents - for

the death of Earth. Guided and in part ruled by the benevolent machine intelligences which they call Moms, the crew occupy their time rehearsing for the eventual conflict, squabbling amongst themselves and conjuring up idealistic social structures for their post-War home. Some eighty to ninety in number, the young men and women have generally adopted names to remind themselves of the lifeforms, nations and cultures of vanished Earth. Relativistic effects have robbed them of any possibility of ever again seeing their contemporaries in the Central Ark, now settled on Mars after some three hundred asleep.

Anvil of Stars takes us beyond the customary biff-bang-thud of space war stories and deep into the human psyche. The intolerable pressures placed upon the so-called Children to avenge their race and planet have already resulted in a number of suicides. The ambivalent Moms persist in giving partial answers to the Children's questions about the actual Benefactors themselves, the tactics which the crew are being called upon to employ and the need for humans to be involved in the act of vengeance at all.

Bear's ability to generate novels at a breakneck pace, packing them with hard science and highly credible characters, has moved him into the forefront of SF writers during the 80's and early 90's.

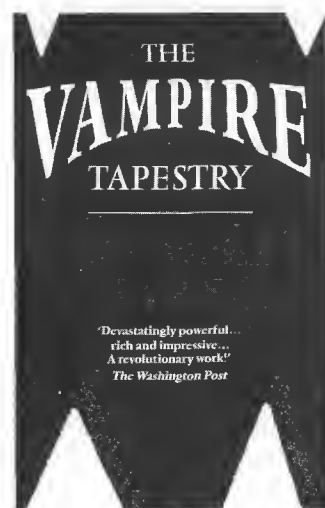
Anvil of Stars is released by Legend simultaneously with the anthology **The Venging**, and can only build upon his now massive reputation. It is in many respects a curious book, satisfying the continuing need for highly dramatic fast moving adventure, but at the same time evoking a deeper analysis of mankind's various insanities than is often found in commercial Science Fiction. I doubt that it was

written as a metaphor for the resurgent nationalism of the last decade of the twentieth century, but in the complex pattern of motivations which drive the Children it is possible to see parallels with the turbulence that has afflicted all areas of the world in the past few years. Are the issues really that simple; can there ever be an action so morally outrageous that punishment of the offender leaves no collateral damage?

Martin, the fashionably troubled and self-analytic hero, is replaced as elective leader of the Children by the forceful and domineering Hans. With the change of leadership comes a change in the pace of the search, an opportunistic rendezvous with another Benefactor ship crewed by aliens, and a serious weakening of the crew's tense certainty of the rightness of their mission. Dissent spreads. Should the sins of the many generations-distant fathers be visited on the sons, descendants whose knowledge of their ancestors' actions is as limited as their understanding of those actions? Bear doesn't dodge the issues; Martin's doubts are thoroughly explored and personified by the varied support and opposition of other Children to Hans' plans. The outcome almost disappoints; *almost*, because human affairs are never so clear-cut between absolute good and absolute evil. However, Bear hasn't lost sight of the moral complexities, and even at this last stage reminds us of them: "Our evil is far less than theirs, but what does that mean?" I don't want to leave the impression that this is an introspective, doomy work; far from it. There's plenty of the Wow! factor throughout it, and at a time when writing about aliens seems to be politically incorrect, or something dullwitted like that, Bear has created a number of highly

engaging and genuinely strange beings to play counterpoint to the humans.

There's always something to quibble about, and for me it's the tweeness of the Children's social structure. They divide themselves into Lost Boys and Wendys; their leader is Pan, his deputy is Christopher Robin. And the ship's name, of course. . . These people are supposed to be in their early twenties, for crying out loud, and however odd their upbringing has been, wouldn't *one* of them have objected? It hardly seems to have the right ring for the multi-cultural crew of the only starship in our planet's history. I kept wondering who was going to be Captain Hook. None of this would matter very much if it didn't irritate - and it may not irritate you, of course. But I found myself looking for little signs of wimpishness everywhere. A shame, because it's a first-class novel, and one which keeps Greg Bear right out there in front.



The Vampire Tapestry
 Author: Suzy McKee Charnas
 Publisher: The Women's Press
 Price £6.95
 ISBN 0-7043-4283-9
 Paperback

An unqualified welcome to **The Vampire Tapestry**, now available in paperback from The Women's Press, and not showing a minute of its 12-year age. First published in America in 1980, it tells the story of Dr Edward Lewis Weyland, PhD, Professor of Anthropology, who just happens to be a vampire. No, this isn't one of those modern-day Dracula rewrites, but a realistic, sensible and totally plausible account of how such a creature could come to exist.

Charnas has taken such pains to construct an internally consistent pattern of being for the good doctor that it might very well ruin your own enjoyment if I were to reveal too much of it here. But he doesn't sleep in a coffin, abhor garlic and crosses, or transform his victims into vampires too. Weyland drinks blood from living creatures but rarely kills, preys on man from necessity as the most reliable and accessible source of nourishment, heals well and is extremely long-lived. But he is a natural creature, perfectly vulnerable to measures well short of a stake through the heart, and he doesn't have fangs, making do with a stinger located discreetly under his tongue to puncture suitable veins. Oh, and he doesn't wear a cape.

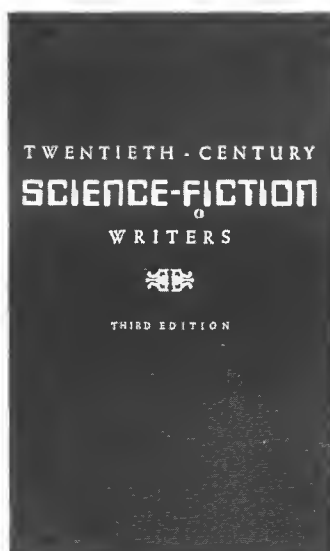
Charnas succeeds in eliciting our sympathy for the vampire, not by the old cliché of making the devil fascinating, but by showing him instead as an almost noble figure, isolated in a world full of dangerous prey and trapped ultimately into becoming more human than is good for him. A cold, arrogant creature, who despises humanity as cattle, Weyland is nonetheless made aware of the dangerous power of human emotion by his encounters with a succession of free-thinking men and women. Their strength of character, generosity and depth of understanding threaten his necessary and cultivated detachment. In a superb piece of writing, an extended section of magnificent prose, Charnas describes Weyland's own emotions on attending a performance of *Tosca* in

Albuquerque. The intensity of the occasion almost destroys him, and the parallel with real human emotion is not lost on him. The central discovery of the nature of his being is almost upon him.

There are dangers in this style of narration. It can become too easy to accept that such a vampire could actually exist, and thus to underplay events which - were such a thing to come about - would surely fall out otherwise. For instance, I just can't accept that any teenage lad could calmly sit in the same room as a proven vampire - even one in restraints - and get on with his homework. Then again, maybe it was the idea of a teenager willingly doing homework that was odd.

I thoroughly recommend this one. Charnas writes with an analytical thoroughness that gets right under the skin of her characters. The result is that the fantastic becomes credible, and the story sweeps you along with an effortless intensity. If you haven't read any of hers yet - start here.

John Hendry



A REVIEW OF 'TWENTIETH CENTURY SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS'

Review by S. V. Copestake

Did you know that J.B. Priestley wrote science-fiction, or that Isaac Asimov, the prolific science-fiction author, has written books of 'Lecherous Limericks'? And very clever they are, too! Did you know that 'fantasy' writer Anne McCaffrey, who

classifies her own work as 'science-fiction', has edited a book called 'Alchemy and Academe: A Collection of Original Stories Concerning Themselves' with Transmutations, Mental and Elemental, Alchemical and Academic? Did you know that Laurence Durrell wrote two science-fiction novels? Were you aware the Patrick Moore has written over twenty children's science-fiction books, as well as 'Can You Speak Venusian?', or that Tolstoy's influence on Russian science-fiction was broadly similar to that exercised by H.G. Wells in this country? And would you have classified George Orwell as a science-fiction writer? There can be no doubt that he was, of course, with 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', but somehow I hadn't made the connection. . .

These facts and insights, and many more, are contained in the third, five-yearly edition of 'Twentieth Century Science-Fiction Writers' by St. James Press.

It's a fascinating book. Perhaps not exactly bedtime reading, weighing in at 1016 large pages, but nonetheless very useful for the writer. The first thing that strikes you about the book is that its catchment area *isn't* restricted to science-fiction. The Editorial Selection has been very wide; writers who have made only a brief sally into science-fiction, but those who output in other fields is well known, are covered. This has resulted, for instance, in a two and a half page entry being devoted to Kingsley Amis, whose output in SF has been restricted to three novels out of a total of some nineteen (as well as assorted plays, essays, poetry and stories, all of which are listed). Rudyard Kipling is included too; of his two and a half page bibliography, only two books of short stories are listed as science-fiction.

There are other surprises. David Eddings, whose output seems to me (and I suspect, to just about everyone else) to fall squarely into the category of fantasy, is included. This eclecticism is surely to be applauded, not only because it serves to de-emphasise artificial barriers between different kinds of writing but

also because it results in a far broader, and quite delightful, cross-section of the writing world. Thus, the reader is likely to be led from Asimov's ponderous entry, with its five or more pages of titles devoted almost entirely to science with or without the fiction, to Mark Twain, whose three and a half pages of entries include only one science-fiction work: 'A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court', which is in fact more obviously a burlesque of Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

There are perpetual astonishments. One further example: Conan Doyle's creation of Sherlock Holmes needs no introduction to anyone, but that he was the creator of Professor Challenger had completely escaped my memory.

Aside from the far-reaching scope of 'Twentieth Century Science-Fiction Writers', much of its appeal lies in its format. Each entry starts with a biography. A complete bibliography follows, then a short comment from living authors, and finally a critical essay on their output. There are (separate) lists of contributors and of science-fiction books and stories, both correlated with the name of the appropriate authors. There is a complete list of all authors mentioned, and a Foreign Language Appendix dealing with science-fiction authors from abroad who regularly write in English.

It is remarkably refreshing to see that the essays are generally not in the least sycophantic. It's rather reassuring, somehow, to turn to the entry for an author whose work you don't admire and see this disapproval mirrored in someone else's appraisal! And this is just one area in which the Book will be of service: the reader can arrive at an objective appreciation of what an author's work is like, and whether it is likely to appeal, without buying one of his books first.

This is perhaps superficial, but I found it strikingly reliable, on the whole. I agreed with the tenor, if not the letter, of most of the reviews I read. Even with authors you already know, the

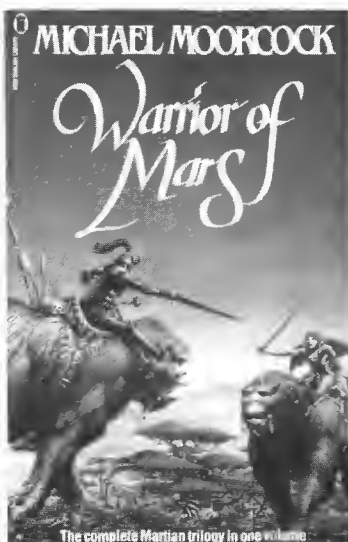
context that the reviews give enables a better perspective to be applied. There are exceptions, of course. John Norman's 26-book *Gor* series, for instance. The literary merit or otherwise of Norman's writing is a matter of personal opinion, but that the books are ant-women (as well as largely fantasy rather than science-fiction) is beyond any doubt. They depict women in extreme subjugation and even degradation, both physical and emotional, with very frequent rapes; that Norman has his victims coming to enjoy the process is irrelevant, men are men on *Gor*, and the women are unwillingly grateful. . . The review of Norman's work treats this obsession as a minor blemish, and condemns his output more from the literary point of view: 'In fact, by the 23rd and 24th *Gor* books, the bulk of the text deals with portraying and justifying the status of women on *Gor*, and action sequences which actually advance the series plot are few and far between.' Hmm. And Kipling's reviewer claims that his influence on science-fiction was 'probably greater than anyone else's of his generation, except Wells. . .', a statement which, even if it were true, could be said to miscast Kipling by the device of overemphasising an aspect of his output for which he is not primarily remembered and entirely excluding the remainder.

Leaving aside the occasional blips - and even these make for interesting reading! - 'Twentieth Century Science Fiction Writers' more than repays investigation.

But why is the book useful - as well as 'merely' interesting! - to writers? Well, there is a mine of information about the authors, including information about where they can be contacted; a boon for literary researchers of all descriptions. As a reference book dealing with a wide spectrum of writers and writing, the Book stands supreme. It's the *context* it provides, allied to the wealth of detail, that makes it so indispensable.

'Twentieth Century

Science Fiction Writers' is intended, at a price of £75, as a library edition; your local library can - and should - order it from St. James Press, PO Box 701, Cheriton House, North Way, Andover, Hants SP10 5YF. tel: 0264 334447.



MOORCOCK'S WARLORD OF MARS

by ANDREW DARLINGTON

Now available in a single volume, Michael Moorcock's 'WARRIORS OF MARS' started out as a 1965 trilogy of novels issued under the pseudonym 'Edward P Bradbury'. This is a review, and the strange history of the stories

Michael Moorcock edits 'NEW WORLDS No. 151'. On page 119 of the issue James Colvin reviews 'WARRIORS OF MARS', the first interplanetary fantasy by Edward P Bradbury. But Moorcock, Colvin and Bradbury are one and the same person! Such elaborate literary incest obscures the origins of one of Moorcock's strangest and most frequently overlooked story cycles. Elsewhere in the issue an advertisement from COMPACT BOOKS, furnishes further details; "announcing the first in a new series of science fiction romances by Edward P Bradbury, 'WARRIORS OF MARS', featuring Michael Kane, swordsman and scientist, and his colourful action-packed adventures on ancient Mars (3s 6d)".

For many years lost and out of print, the object of rumour

and collectors quests, the three 'Bradbury' novels were eventually re-issued by New English Libraries under new titles and carrying Moorcock's own name. Now combined into a single stretch-Limo of a volume complete with introduction and new background information from Moorcock, the original publishers blurbs still apply; "old-style S.F. romance addicts shouldn't miss the fast-paced" Michael Kane sagas.

Moorcock wrote his 'Martian' trilogy between April and August 1965, drawing heavily on the mythology of Edgar Rice Burroughs' ornate fantasies of the 1920's. The books seem to have been pure hack-work designed to generate finance for other, more respectable literary projects, although they're also consciously a nod of acknowledgement to the influence of Burroughs. As such they have little to do with the mainstream of Moorcock's work. But there are tangible reference points; inevitably Michael Kane is later destined to join the roll-call of 'Eternal Champion' incarnations. Colvin declares the book "scarcely modern in style or content" - and its links with his personal past sprawl back as far as the young Moorcock editing his 'BURROUGHSIANA' fanzine dedicated to ERB, and churning out his own highly Burroughsian 'Sojan' adventures for 'TARZAN MONTHLY'. One of which - "Dek of Noothar", provides a further link. Like the Kane novels it is set on ERBian Mars, and like the Elric stories, it features a 'Sword of Life' (the story is now available as part of a 'SOJAN' collection published by Savoy Books).

Initially there's an attempt to flesh out the Edward Powys Bradbury pseudonym with a subterfuge of detailed bogus biographical notes. Bradbury was allegedly born in 1924, fifteen years before Moorcock. He "spent some time in the Far East, where he developed a strong interest in ancient Sanskrit literature". The claim that he "has written detective stories,

westerns and weird thrillers as well as non-fiction" is perhaps an oblique reference to Moorcock's own prolific writing for the likes of THE SEXTON BLAKE LIBRARY, while the additional "he cannot stop writing and is convinced that, when he dies, he will be found with a pen in his hand. His only hope is that the story will be finished!" - has yet to be realised. Bradbury "continued to travel, this time in Europe, Africa and America", lending weight to his introductory notes to 'WARRIORS OF MARS' which relate how he (Bradbury) first meets the 'strange enigmatic' American Professor Michael Kane during a "warm and bright and soporific" summer in Nice. The notes, dated April 1965 in the original Compact Books edition (1969 in the later NEL re-issue) are as Colvin suggests, written in a deliberately antiquated style.

Kane divulges to Bradbury the details of his first arrival on Mars how he defends the city of Varnal from attack by the Argzoon Blue Giants, and how he eventually tracks these would-be invaders through Narlet, City of Thieves, across the Wilderness of Sorrow and the Wastes of Doom, to their city in the Caves of Darkness 'beneath the mountains' to destroy the N'aal-Beast and with it the power of Horguhl their evil female leader. Colvin hazards - not too speculatively, that the book is influenced by Edgar Rice Burroughs "but is actually much more readable". The last point is debatable; the former inescapable.

The similarity of the initials E.P.B. and E.R.B. is obviously intentional. The dedication, to Burroughs and H.G. Wells, rams the point home.

Burroughs' original hero, John Carter, escapes from unfriendly Apache Indians in Arizona through a vague combination of teleportation and sorcery, to find himself on the plains of Mars (Barsoom), where he reaches the city of Helium, its swordsmen, its Jeddak, and its beautiful princess Dejah Thoris. Michael Kane is projected from a Chicago research

centre through a malfunctioning Matter Transmitter, to find himself on ancient Mars (Vashu), where he reaches the city of Varnal of the Green Mist, its swordsmen, its Bradhinak, and its beautiful princess Shizala. In Moorcock's second Martian volume, 'BLADES OF MARS' Kane returns to Varnal, this time financed by Bradbury. Once there he discovers the lost underground city of the technologically advanced Yaksha, helps to win a revolution, and fights Spider Creatures in the dark obsidian city of the Western Continent, before he finally finds Shizala again and marries her. While the third book, 'BARBARIANS OF MARS', tells how he again travels to the Western Continent to recover looted machines of the extinct Yaksha he hopes will defeat an ancient plague of Green Death afflicting Cend—Amrid, and the dogma followed by its machine-like victims. This Mars is a world of barbaric splendour, transcendental beauty, and vile cruelties described with characteristic Moorcockian lavish, inventive, and often poetic fluency. Kane rides a Dahara, an ape-like creature the size of a Shire Horse, and with his Blue Giant companion Hool Haji, his Martian Odysseys bring him into regular lusty conflict with the dog-men Hounds of Hahg, Cat People, and the winged Jihadoo; although unlike Moorcock's concurrent Elric and Dorian Hawkmoon novels, there are no metaphysical entities.

Artist and long-time Moorcock collaborator Jim Cawthorn replaces Colvin as NEW WORLDS reviewer for the third Martian novel (in

'NEW WORLDS No.159' - February 1966), finding in its prose "a simplicity which is deliberate; Bradbury is clearly capable of more sophisticated work". He goes on to argue persuasively that 'BARBARIANS OF MARS' "makes a fairly ambitious exploration (for this type of novel) of the nature of fear, carrying the theme on a flow of exotic adventure and vigorous action". Perhaps so, but perhaps Cawthorn is less playfully impartial than Moorcock's own alter-ego Colvin, who condescends "this, I gather, is what they call the work of a natural storyteller".

Kane - a "tall, slim-hipped giant, bronzed and handsome", learned his swordsmanship from the eccentric French-born fencing master to the Tsar of Russia. He relates his 'testament' to Bradbury in the first person, just as the U. S. Army-trained Carter relates his adventures to Burroughs. But like all imitations (and Burroughs Martian novels are already over-imitated) the Moorcock/Bradbury trilogy lacks whatever indefinable charm is most distinctive about the original. Indeed, often Bradbury's writing is more clumsy and less imaginative than his model. Moorcock's hero is chivalrously dour, morally one-dimensional. He is given to terrible utterances like "Shizala, loving me with a deep and abiding love which I fully reciprocated". He is also prone to much narcissistic preening in which he relates how he is admired by the Martian Warriors, by the hand-maidens, and by virtually everyone else with whom he comes into contact.

Probably such exaggeration is intended as pastiche, a humorously affectionate, gently mocking tribute. Colvin seems to think so. Reviewing 'BLADES OF MARS' in 'NEW WORLD No.156' he claims that Bradbury "emulates Burroughs, even down to the latter's reactionary, Victorian-style philosophy". Adding "I suspect that parts of this have been written with tongue in cheek".

Following their years languishing out of print - the object of devotees' quests through junk shops and market stalls, the trilogy's salvage from the defunct Compact imprint brought new editions retitled 'CITY OF THE BEAST', 'LORD OF THE SPIDERS' and 'MASTER OF THE PIT', for which the quirky original Jim Cawthorn illustrations are replaced by technically better, but less evocatively effective covers by Tim White. Ensuring that both vintages retain a keen completists price-tag.

And now? - the initial advertisement boasts of "sheer escapism and colourful action in the old manner". And on that level 'WARRIORS OF MARS' remains highly readable. Colvin closes his original review on the downbeat - "if you are a Burroughs fan you are bound to like this novel - it is quite as good as anything by the Old Master". Adding tartly "which isn't saying much from me". Moorcock, Colvin, and Bradbury are one and the same person.

BY ANDREW DARLINGTON
PUBLISHING HISTORY:-

'WARRIORS OF MARS' BY
EDWARD P BRADBURY
(COMPACT 1965)

RE-ISSUED AS 'CITY OF THE BEAST' BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK (NEL 1971 - 60P)

'BLADES OF MARS' BY
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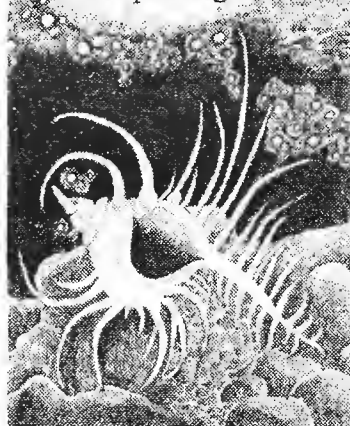
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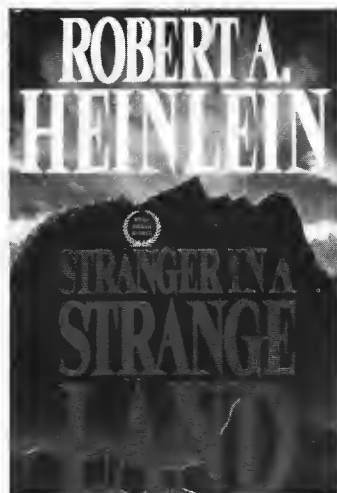
Sound SF will be reviewed
in a future edition of FAR
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These pages detail the new books we've received at FAR POINT since the last issue appeared. Space obviously prevents us giving a full review to every one, so these pages simply provide you with the publisher's blurb and the details you'll need if you want to get hold of a copy. Full reviews of some of them will appear in future issues



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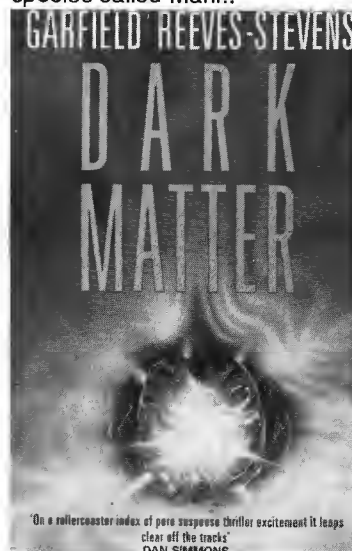
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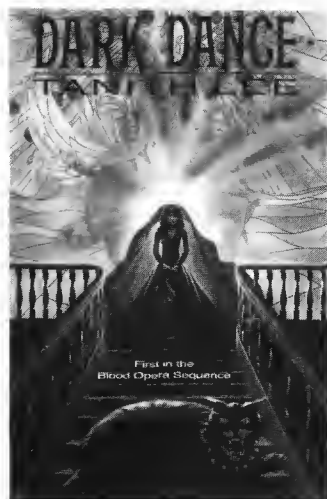
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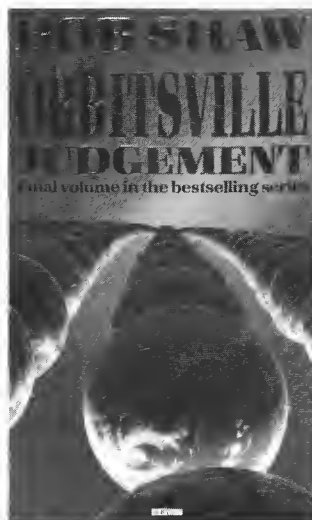
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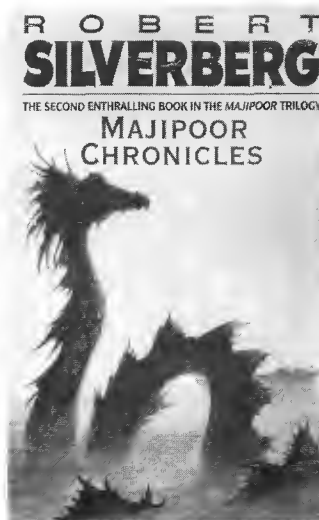
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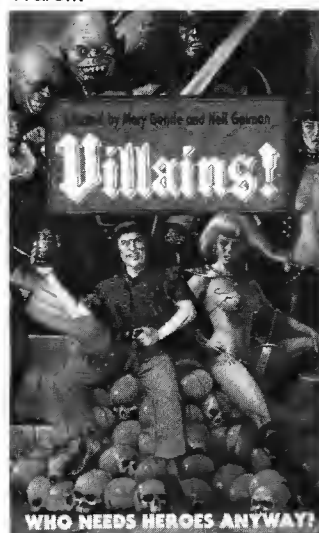
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